

# OCTAVIO MÉNDEZ PEREIRA AND PANAMANIAN FOUNDATIONAL FICTION

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## Abstract

Utilizing Sommer's concept of *foundational fictions*, this essay analyzes Octavio Méndez Pereira's novel *Nuñez de Balboa* (1934). The article argues that the novel became a vehicle of Panamanian nationalism, presenting the isthmus as an Hispanic, mestizo nation and as a country without ties to the Afro-Caribbean world. This vision arises principally from the book's main characters, Balboa and the indigenous princess Anayansi. Their romance projects the idea of a homogenous nation, contrasting sharply with the tumult of early twentieth-century, including the immigration of thousands of West Indians. *Nuñez de Balboa* illustrates the cultural strategies of Panama's elite and its desire to control the process of modernization.

*Key words:* Octavio Méndez Pereira, Foundational fiction, Panama, mestizo nation.

## Resumen

Con base en el concepto de *novelas fundacionales*, este ensayo analiza la novela *Núñez de Balboa* (1934) de Octavio Méndez Pereira. El artículo argumenta que la obra se convirtió en un vehículo del nacionalismo panameño, presentando a Panamá como una nación hispana y mestiza y como un país sin ligas con el mundo afrocaribeño. Esta visión surge principalmente de los protagonistas del libro, Balboa y la princesa indígena Anayansi. Su romance proyecta la idea de una nación homogénea, en contraste con la gran agitación que se experimentaba a principios del siglo xx, incluyendo la inmigración de miles de antillanos. *Núñez de Balboa* ilustra las estrategias culturales de la elite panameña y su intención de controlar el proceso de modernización.

*Palabras clave:* Octavio Méndez Pereira, novela fundacional, Panamá, nación meztiza.

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# OCTAVIO MÉNDEZ PEREIRA Y LA NOVELA FUNDACIONAL PANAMEÑA

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## Résumé

Basé sur la notion de *fictions de fondation*, ce travail analyse le roman d'Octavio Méndez Pereira "Núñez de Balboa" (1934), et soutient que ce roman, devenu une déclaration du nationalisme panaméen, présente Panama comme une nation hispanique et métisse, et comme un pays détaché du monde afro-caribéen. Cette vision s'appuie principalement sur les héros du livre, Balboa et la princesse indigène Anayansi, dont l'union projette l'idée d'une nation homogène, loin de refléter la grande agitation qui, incluant l'immigration de milliers d'Antillais, secoua le Panama au début du XXe siècle. "Núñez de Balboa" illustre les stratégies culturelles de l'élite panaméenne et son intention de contrôler les processus de la modernisation.

*Mots-clefs:* Octavio Méndez Pereira, fiction de fondation, Panamá, nation métisse.

## Samenvatting

Het artikel analyseert de roman *Núñez de Balboa* (1934) van de Panamese auteur Octavio Méndez Pereira aan de hand van het concept *foundational fictions* van Doris Sommer. Het artikel argumenteert dat de roman een instrument werd van het Panamees nationalisme, met een visie van de natie waarin de zwarte cultuur afwezig is. De eenheid van de hoofdfiguren, Balboa en de indiaanse prinses Anayansi, projecteert het bestaan van een homogene en mestieze natie, welke in schril contrast staat met de chaos van het begin van de twintigste eeuw toen duizenden afro-antillianen emigreerden om bij de Kanaal van Panama te komen werken. Het boek van Méndez Pereira geeft weer de culturele strategie van de Panamese elite, die het proces van modernisering wilde controleren.

*Kernwoorden:* Octavio Méndez Pereira, foundational fictions, Panamá, mestizo natie.

## INTRODUCTION

“ Romantic novels go hand in hand with patriotic history,” writes Doris Sommer in her seminal work on Latin American nation-building (Sommer, 1991, 7). Sommer, whose investigation examines literary works from the nineteenth century, emphasizes their emergence amidst the unrest following independence from Spain. Political and economic instability characterized these decades, and often the authors of the texts were themselves participating in the conflicts. Their writings offered a rejection of these societal divisions and proffered the elite’s hope of a more cohesive community. Their vision became even more apparent in the early twentieth century when new challenges, especially from abroad, revived the “foundational fictions” which quickly became standard readings in Latin American schools (Sommer, 1991). Generations of students became acquainted with these sentimental stories centered on romantic relationships between characters of disparate backgrounds. Typically the protagonists of the novels represent opposing groups, whether these divisions are ethnic, regional, or social in nature. Ignoring the conventions and obstacles intended to keep them apart, the protagonists follow their passions and recklessly fall in love. The objective, as Sommer emphasizes, is not to titillate or to “tease but literally to engender” the birth of new nations (Sommer, 1991, 18). The lovers thus tend to consummate their relationships and as a result, often project the idea of unity or *mestizaje*. The result, as she notes, is a powerful tool of Latin American nation-building, a persuasive literary account, practically indiscernible from the official history, relating the “non-violent consolidation” of deeply antagonistic sectors (Sommer, 1991, 6). This essay proposes to use Sommer’s ideas to examine nationalism in Panama. Specifically, the essay will treat the writer Octavio Méndez Pereira (1887-1954) and his fictionalized account of the life of Vasco Nuñez de Balboa.

Octavio Méndez Pereira published *Nuñez de Balboa, El tesoro de Dabaibe* in 1934 just over three decades after Panama’s separation from Colombia in 1903. While its emergence was rela-

tively late in terms of foundational fictions, the majority of which were written in the previous century, the book must be considered within the context of Panamanian history and the isthmus' delayed achievement of independence. From this perspective, the novel's tardy appearance is entirely logical, corresponding to a similar phase of national consolidation. Much like the statesmen-writers who preceded him by decades, Octavio Méndez Pereira had arisen as a prominent *letrado* who was also deeply involved in his country's political life. As Panama's most important educator and the subsequent rector of the national university, he and other leaders were facing severe difficulties in their attempts to legitimize and unify the republic. For decades, Panamanian intellectuals had pressed for their country's autonomy, justifying independence on their aspirations for economic and cultural development and on Colombia's inability to secure an interoceanic route. The Liberal dream of Europeanization had traditionally fueled Panamanian nationalism (Soler, 1985 and Figueroa, 1982, 239-257). Now Panama was in a period of rapid modernization, a result of the canal and the enormous U.S. presence that had established itself on the isthmus in 1904. This intervention which for Méndez Pereira had brought many welcomed changes such as the "state of peace and liberty" and the "sanitation of our principal cities," also caused consternation among his social class.

As Méndez Pereira had first outlined in a 1920 publication, U.S. and other foreign corporations had arrived with the canal, and now these businesses were penetrating the isthmus' economy (Méndez Pereira, in Jaén Arosemena, n.d., 29). They dominated the isthmus' banking sector, its commercial agriculture, and domestic commerce, leaving Panamanians with "little more than the crumbs of the foreign ships... that pass us by," he later wrote in an essay defining Panama as a "nation of transit" (Méndez Pereira, 1946, 15-25). Thousands of West Indian immigrants had also immigrated to the country. Recruited by the North Americans to work on the interoceanic route, many of these men and women remained after the waterway's completion to challenge Panama's religion, its language, and Hispanic culture. The isthmus was becoming more African, not European. Latin American

intellectuals were especially critical of the U.S. presence and tended to portray Panama as a "pseudo-republic," openly questioning its ties to Spanish America (Fabela, 1920, 159). In addition, the period was one of growing political strife as the isthmus' public life became more pluralistic and contentious. The post-construction years were marked by rising labor activism, government turbulence, and a brief but bloody indigenous rebellion in 1925. Finally, U.S. officials frequently intervened in the affairs of the republic, seemingly confirming its image as an imperialist colony. While Méndez Pereira was a fundamentally a Liberal and acknowledged the benefits of modernization, he also warned against its turmoil and perceived dangers. Méndez Pereira supported the traditional themes of the Panamanian identity. Like many other intellectuals of his generation, he continued to press for change and the adoption of outside models, but he also argued that Panamanians had become too dependent on the North Americans and lacked a clear sense of their own identity. They suffered from, in his words, an "indifferent psychology, without a sense of traditions... or even a well-understood concept of nationalism." He proposed that education was the only means to create a "true nation" and to prevent Panama from remaining a simple "conglomerate" (Méndez Pereira, 1946, 16, 23).

Méndez Pereira's novel is part of this nation-building process, and as such, reflects many of Doris Sommer's theories. To begin, it will be shown that the novel presents itself as a truthful history and not as a fictionalized account of the conquest. The book, which became a standard text in Panamanian schools, also ties these supposed facts to national themes. Méndez Pereira relates the colony from a contemporary perspective. He utilizes the symbols of the new country as he recounts the deeds of these first "Panamanians." More importantly, his narration serves to unite dissimilar sectors and offers an idealized vision of the isthmus, far removed from its actual turmoil, strife, and diversity. Méndez Pereira's nationalism hid the country's realities. Balboa and the indigenous woman Anayansi are the book's principal characters and the eroticism and romance that unite them and other couples provide the reader with a sense of a homogenous nation born of native princesses and gallant, courageous Span-

iards. In author's words, he paints the rise of "heroic mestizaje" (Méndez Pereira, 1959, 60). In this assertion, the book also reflects its most evident weaknesses or what Sommer describes as the "pretty lies" of foundational fiction. Balboa and Anayansi are natural "aristocrats" whose union is intended to maintain the isthmus' old patriarchy (Sommer, 1991, 27, 48). Their chivalrous love stands in stark contrast to the tumult of modernity while concealing the country's ethnic multiplicity, especially the thousands of West Indians who had arrived to work on the canal. These blacks and the many others who had come earlier, during the Spanish colony, are nearly absent from the author's portrayal of Panama. Blackness has no place in this conception of the nation. As foundational fiction identified with the country's history, Méndez Pereira's novel demonstrates the strategies of Panamanian nationalism as well as its limits in uniting the isthmus.

#### "PATRIOTIC HISTORY"

"There is nothing in this account that is not strictly historical," wrote Octavio Méndez Pereira in the prologue to Nuñez de Balboa, arguing the "truth alone... is more marvelous than imaginary marvels" (Méndez Pereira, 1959, 9). The author was seemingly interested in proving this reality. While delving into the dreams and personal thoughts of the "Discoverer," he included a bibliography at the end of his novel, and he periodically cited the colony's most important chroniclers, including Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés, Pascual de Andagoya, Peter Martyr, and Bartolomé de las Casas. Their writings and other quotes often appear in antiquated Spanish, providing the text with a tone and sense of legitimacy. Matilde Real de González emphasized as well the author's use of "fundamental facts from the isthmus' and the continent's history," and it is true that the novelist's story line parallels that of more academic biographers. This correspondence, she noted, "increases the merit of the work, vitalizing in an extraordinary way the book's historical content" (Real de González, 1959, 38). Real de González and others certainly recognized the writing as essentially fictional, and even Méndez

Pereira himself referred to the account as a novel. Nevertheless, they and others also insisted on its "fidelity to historical events," and it is noteworthy that some researchers have actually classified the book as history, including the country's most important literary scholar Rodrigo Miró (García, 1986, 96 and Miró, 1976, 219-220). Even Ernesto Castellero Reyes, one of Panama's leading historians, listed it among the country's "historical studies" (Castellero Reyes, 1958, 25). Nuñez de Balboa, like other foundational fictions, thus became linked to patriotic history even as it rendered the conquest from an imaginary and modern perspective. As Carlos Manuel Gasteazoro has argued in an essay on Méndez Pereira's writings, the author conceived of history as an "auxiliary" which served in his meditations on the Panamanian reality. "Like Benedetto Croce, he felt that any true history is ideally contemporary in nature, as only an interest in the present can move one to investigate the past" (Gasteazoro, 1970, 67).

History was meant to address contemporary problems, and in this sense, one of the author's chief interests was clearly the issue of nationalism as he uses the chronicle to build the symbols of his country and attempts to legitimize Panama in eyes of Latin Americans. Panama, in the words of the Argentine socialist Alfredo Palacios, was seen as a "Yankee colony" and not as a nation-state deserving of respect. He and other Latin American intellectuals ridiculed its independence and pondered whether the isthmus would be "absorbed by the North American colossus" (Palacios, 1961, 138, 153). To contradict this image, Méndez Pereira presents Balboa as a figure worthy of admiration, a "man who submitted himself to the rigors of destiny" and whose historic march to the Pacific constituted an epic event, not only for Panama but for all of Spanish America (Méndez Pereira, 1959, 23). The first hero of Panama was also a hero of Hispanic America. In 1924 Panama had erected a seaside statue of Balboa. It had earlier renamed its currency after the Spaniard, and it had impressed his countenance on its coins and postage stamps (Susto, 1957; Castellero Reyes, 1966; Vial, 1959). Méndez Pereira's intention was to further this cult, in part, by offering a literary explanation of Balboa's importance to the continent.

The author emphasizes Balboa's designs for the future, his vision of Panama as the "point of departure" for the later expeditions to South America (Méndez Pereira, 1959, 142). Balboa, according to Méndez Pereira, had heard rumors of the Inca Empire. He had first learned of its existence in a conversation with the indigenous chief Comarge's son, a point later disputed by one of Balboa's biographers (Romoli, 1953, 102). Méndez Pereira nevertheless portrays the knowledge of the kingdom as accurate, and he carefully outlines the arrival of Pizarro and other conquerors whose efforts would be critical to its eventual subjugation. Pizarro's character, in particular, receives special attention: "Balboa, for his part, had great affection for this man... temperate, indefatigable, disciplined... and certain in his speech... he had acquired most of these qualities as a soldier in Italy" (Méndez Pereira, 1959, 20-21). When Comarge's son relates his "marvelous history" of Peru, Pizarro leans forward and listens attentively as "his hope sprung directly from that of Balboa" (Méndez Pereira, 1959, 49-50).

For Méndez Pereira, the Pacific's discovery is essentially a stage in the settlement of Peru and a critical achievement for the spread of *Hispanidad* throughout the continent. A central concern of the author was to present Panama as Hispanic or as Real de González wrote, the "receptacle and distribution center of Hispanic and European culture" (Real de González, 1959, 37). Indeed further contradicting the depiction of the isthmus as a U.S. domain, Méndez Pereira insists that the Panamanian capital later became a significant Spanish city "with palaces, and cathedrals, and convents of stone (Méndez Pereira, 1959, 142). The author's assertions resemble those of Juan B. Sosa who was heading a historiographical effort to glorify the colony (Sosa, 1919). While the Liberals of the Nineteenth century had disparaged this period and asserted that Colombian rule had only preserved Spanish despotism, Sosa, Samuel Lewis, and others began to romanticize this era. They argued that the isthmus had served as a key juncture of the Spanish empire as reflected in its opulent churches, roads, and public buildings (Lewis, n.d.). Panama had always been critical to Spanish America, first as a staging area for the conquest and later as a point of international trade.



More importantly its earliest settlers were already Panamanians as they live and struggle in an environment that is recognizably national. Méndez Pereira, in Sommer's words, narrates "ideal histories backward" in his effort to validate and give shape to the new country (Sommer, 1991, 18). The nation thus appears readily in the colony, some four hundred years before Panama's separation from Colombia.

In the jungle, Balboa stumbles across the country's national flower, the *Flor del Espíritu Santo*, and "with almost mystical unction," he uproots it and has it sent to his garden (Méndez Pereira, 1959, 69). When he returns to Santa María la Antigua, he gives a golden replica to Anayansi who takes Balboa by the arm and leads him to the original plant. Despite Anayansi claims that the orchid must be carefully tended, its "thick leaves" are the only ones to have survived an attack of ants (Méndez Pereira, 1959, 94). Similar symbolic, if clumsy, moments appear regularly in the novel, tying the narrative to the new nation. Before his death, Balboa even envisions the future of the isthmus. While facing execution on orders of Pedro Arias Dávila, he dreams of the foundation of Panama City. He foresees Panama's tradition of international transit and the construction of the interoceanic canal. Méndez Pereira connects Balboa to the Panamanian identity. He portrays the Spanish explorer as an isthmian hero whose trajectory moreover projects the idea of national unity. Unity was the vision that Méndez Pereira hoped to construct to counterbalance the country's cultural and economic disruptions. His nationalist vision denied these and other realities.

Utilizing Balboa and his relationship with an indigenous woman, Méndez Pereira presents the Panamanians as a unified and *mestizo* people, a consensus emerging broadly in the isthmus' literature. Indeed many contemporary authors were fleeing into the countryside to find their fictional material among its supposedly more Spanish-indigenous inhabitants. *Ruralismo*, as described by an early proponent, was a deliberate effort to present the *campesino* as the "base of our nationalism" (Huerta, 1930, 3-4). Simultaneously Narciso Garay and others studied the Interior's music and dance and argued that these traditions alone represented Panamanian culture (Garay, 1930). Eventually their efforts

bloomed into a powerful folk movement. The harmony and homogeneity arising from these rural songs and dances contrasted sharply with the country's cultural heterogeneity, particularly evident in the principal cities. Michael Conniff has described the West Indian migration to Panama as a "demographic tidal wave, the largest yet in Caribbean history." He observes that the influx continued even after the waterway's completion (Conniff, 1985, 29, 49). By 1930 over ten percent of the country's population had been born outside the country. About one-quarter of the capital's inhabitants had immigrated from abroad, and nearly half of Colon was foreign (Secretaría de Agricultura y Obras Públicas, 21-23, 131, 139-141). The West Indians alone numbered between 50,000 and 60,000 (Conniff, 1985, 66). As George Westerman wrote: "one of the most salient features of isthmian history has been the impact of successive waves of Caribbean immigrants" (Westerman, 1980, 14). Nevertheless they and other "minority" groups played no part in Méndez Pereira's national identity as this construction emerged largely as a product of Balboa and Anayansi.

#### NATIONAL UNITY

A central plot of the novel is the courtship of these lovers whose union, in part, arises from the eroticism of Anayansi. Anayansi is the fictionalized daughter of the ruler of Careta, one of the first indigenous chiefdoms to align itself with the Spaniard. Chima, the leader of Careta, actually offered Balboa one of his progeny in recognition of the new relationship with the Europeans. Méndez Pereira utilizes this historical fact to create Anayansi. He depicts the "savage princess" as graceful, slim, and athletic. She wears her jet-black hair in two large braids, and "her movements and gestures" are those of a "domesticated tiger" (Méndez Pereira, 1959, 39). Balboa quickly falls for the exotic princess who soon recognizes "in Balboa a superior being." In fact, she comes to see him as "almost a god" (Méndez Pereira, 1959, 40). They consummate their relationship following a provocative dance in which Anayansi sways her hips and breasts for the aroused conqueror.

In this moment, the "exotic fruit was offered for the grafting of the new race" (Méndez Pereira, 1959, 45). The harmony and bliss that follow offer an image of tranquility, diverging from the contemporary reality of instability and unrest.

After the completion of the canal, Panama had experienced an economic downturn. The following years witnessed some of the country's most bitter labor disputes, growing ethnic tensions, and the emergence of a new generation determined to throw off U.S. imperialism. As Thomas Percy has argued in *We Answer only to God*, Panama's state and society were becoming increasingly fragmented (Percy, 1998). The government, in particular, suffered from severe problems and from what Carlos Guevara Mann has identified as persistent lack of legitimacy (Guevara Mann, 1996). *Acción Comunal*, founded in 1923, best represented the rise of the younger, middle-class reformers who faulted their elder leaders for their accommodationist position (Pérez, and León Lerma, n.d.). The efforts of this group culminated in January 1931 with the first successful toppling of a post-independence government. None of these tensions seem apparent in Méndez Pereira's narration, designed nevertheless as an "evocative work" for the country (Méndez Pereira, 1959, 9). Again the nationalist vision stood in stark contrast to the isthmus' reality. The adventurous and daring Balboa is, to some extent, domesticated, becoming within Sommer's paradigm, "remarkably feminized." (Sommer, 1991, 16). Indeed the warrior adapts readily to the "warmth of the home" while his lover renounces her old ways and grows to be European (Méndez Pereira, 1959, 93). Projecting the author's dream of a culturally unified society, Anayansi abandons her indigenous community and insists on living in the colony where she even reads Castilian and dresses as a Spaniard. Like the elite with its neocolonial residences constructed in the early twentieth century, Anayansi puts on a kind of costume that she eventually wears with "grace and elegant ease." (Méndez Pereira, 1959, 94). The lovers' domestic happiness marks a time of prosperity, further illustrating this proposition of an idealized community far removed from the country's discordant actuality and even the events of the conquest.

The historian Carl Sauer emphasized Balboa's ability to keep the "Spaniards in line" and argued that the colony, in large measure, drew strength from his skills (Sauer, 1966, 220). Similarly Balboa's biographer Altolaquirre y Duvale described the leader as a "man of great energy" and insisted that Santa María la Antigua flourished under his guidance (De Altolaquirre y Duvale, 1914, XIII). Méndez Pereira develops this interpretation to a greater extent and romanticizes the image of Balboa and the settlement. Panama under his direction becomes a paradise with abundant game, fruit trees, and fertile fields and gardens. The "best harmony" reigns among its inhabitants as Balboa treats his followers with kindness and impartiality (Méndez Pereira, 1959, 41). When times are bad, he shares the worst hardships with his followers, and when fortune shines, he distributes the rewards fairly among his men. Balboa compassionately forgives the treason of misguided enemies. Like a good father, he tends to the sick with "paternal care" and devotedly searches for those who have fallen to hostile parties (Méndez Pereira, 1959, 55). "Just and impartial with his subordinates... everyone felt secure and tranquil with him at the helm" (Méndez Pereira, 1959, 60). Balboa, according to the author, was also free of prejudice as he "operated under the influence of Anayansi" who "had shown him that there were no fundamental differences between the two races" (Méndez Pereira, 1959, 77). Again Méndez Pereira transforms facts to support his vision.

As Sauer wrote, the Spaniard established alliances with indigenous groups, wisely preferring to co-opt leaders rather than simply to destroy them: "Balboa would confront the natives with a show of force and, having scared them, would then offer friendship and live up to it." Sauer described the resulting relationship as a "sort of obligate paratism in which the hosts were not in the process of destruction by their predators" (Sauer, 1966, 219). Méndez Pereira, however, interprets the tactics as more benevolent. Balboa extends friendship out of a sense of justice, and while some indigenous groups wage war against the Spaniards, others offer their assistance, revealing the "secrets of the jungle." Méndez Pereira insists that this "touching devotion and efficient aid were extremely valuable to the Spanish" (Méndez Pereira,

1959, 74). He acknowledges that the Europeans' arrival signified the end of indigenous people, but his suggestion is that this development was not entirely negative. Indians are portrayed as passive, melancholy, and superstitious as "only death could free them from slavery and bring the happiness and rest that they sought" (Méndez Pereira, 1959, 75). The natives' decline is a necessary, if tragic event, and one which foreshadows the ultimate unity of the isthmus. The author's central goal is to depict this supposed merger in the face of what Thomas Percy has described as "massive demographic and social upheaval" (Percy, 1998, 7). The colony is to serve as a solution for contemporary problems; it is to offer a cultural device for the current confusion. The settlement of the isthmus is thus a collaborative effort, paralleling the romantic relationship of Balboa and Anayansi and numerous other Spaniards and indigenous women appearing in the novel. The march to the Pacific is particularly dependent on the Indians' assistance as the natives serve as porters and guides and provide the Spanish with provisions. Balboa's tactic of cooperation contrasts the strategy of his rivals whose brutal and unjust actions create serious divisions, not only between important sectors but also between lovers. These impediments, however, only increase the desire for the projected community. Indeed as Sommer notes, "every obstacle... heightens their/our love for the possible nation" (Sommer, 1991, 48).

In this regard, Méndez Pereira utilizes the figure of Pedrarias and his well-known brutality and ineffectiveness as a leader. Pedrarias' appointment by the crown marked a clear victory for those who opposed Balboa's ascension as head of the colony. Historians have often treated the rivalry between these men, but Méndez Pereira relates the story in a particular fashion to benefit his vision of national consolidation. Pedrarias essentially serves to make unity more precious and more the object of yearning for the reader. Most importantly, his arrival disrupts the fictionalized romance. The new official complicates the relationship between Balboa and Anayansi and thus, more generally, the consolidation of Panamanian society. Méndez Pereira emphasizes that the Governor insisted that Balboa marry his eldest daughter, and while it is unclear, as one of his biographers has observed, if

this union actually occurred, its announcement and preparation offer a fictional opportunity (Romoli, 1953, 288). Méndez Pereira depicts the arrangement as an insincere covenant, intended to co-opt temporarily a political rival, before Pedrarias could move to eliminate Balboa. The wedding also separates the “Discoverer” from the princess. Anayansi stoically agrees to leave the house of Balboa, only requesting that she be allowed to stay in the community: “You taught me how to live as a European, and I could not become accustomed to living again as a savage” (Méndez Pereira, 1959, 130). Anayansi subsequently faces a series of unwanted advances by a Spaniard deemed unworthy of her attention. Andrés de Garabito actually attacks the princess on one occasion and decides to betray Balboa when his advances prove unsuccessful.

Paralleling this history of frustration and growing desire is the relation of Pedrarias’ incompetence as colonial governor. The author presents Pedrarias as embittered old man who arrives full “malice, treason, and jealousy.” The newcomer’s primary concerns are “gold and the exercise of power,” and he and his followers neglect the more basic needs of the settlement (Méndez Pereira, 1959, 107, 104). Pedrarias’ rule encourages hunger, disease, and flight as he and his lieutenants commit atrocities against the Indians. Méndez Pereira especially focuses on the expedition of Juan de Ayora whose cruelty proves critical in making enemies of the native inhabitants. The indigenous friends of Balboa now turn against the Spanish. Pedrarias thus interrupts the movement toward unity, the peaceful integration of dissimilar elements. The Governor’s most alarming crime, however, is the arrest of Balboa whose skill and popularity provoke the envy of his rival. At the end of the novel, Balboa faces execution at the hands of his opponent, and he is even refused a last opportunity to visit with Anayansi. These tragedies, however, only further the sense of tension and heighten the reader’s longing for romantic union. The obstructions fuel a desire for this imagined convergence, and at the end of novel, Balboa appears as an apparition alongside Anayansi. Presumably their spirits materialize years into the future, as a kind of lesson for the independent country. Their relationship survives even the characters’ own death, implying the

inevitability of tranquility through *mestizaje*. The novel suggests that this process forms the basis of the new nation, a community of disparate peoples harmoniously united through love.

#### CONCLUSION

*Nuñez de Balboa* is a product of this period of social disruptions when intellectuals such as Méndez Pereira were attempting to unify Panama and justify its existence as an autonomous state. In the midst of the tumult and change following the construction of the canal, he and others suggested a solution to the isthmus' domestic turmoil. They argued that the Panamanians were essentially a *mestizo* nation. The Panamanians were the creation of European and indigenous ancestors who had peacefully come together during the Spanish colony and created the basis for an autonomous and Hispanic country. Panama's identity had formed centuries before the separation from Colombia and had evolved in a manner that assured the isthmus' stability. While the proposed solution to Panama's dilemmas sought to legitimize and unite the republic, this prescription was clearly designed to protect the upper class' status. Indeed the "pretty lies" of foundational fiction not only served to conceal divisions but also to maintain a hierarchical social order (Sommer, 1991, 48). These intentions are partly revealed in the characters of Balboa and Anayansi.

The chief protagonists of the novel are essentially aristocrats who, in Sommer's words: "appear... easily distinguished from the masses" (Sommer, 1991, 48). Balboa hides aboard a ship to escape his debts in *Hispanola*. He flees to *Tierra Firme* to avoid his creditors, but he quickly proves his noble status through his decisive action. A brilliant and courageous warrior, he is a natural leader of men, and he far surpasses in virtue any of his rivals. Indeed one of his early competitors Nicuesa actually contemplates eating his own dog. Similarly Anayansi is a savage but of noble birth, and her rapid Europeanization assures her superiority. Slaves and humble servants inhabit this happy community which while projecting a sense of accord, is decidedly elitist in

nature. As Sommer notes, intellectuals like Méndez Pereira were anxious to strengthen their nation-states, but they were also wanted to maintain their own sense of privilege. Like the novel's patrician characters who defy their own deaths, the upper class was to remain dominant in Panamanian society, even as it faced the challenges of modernization. The values conveyed by the text thus are those of an older society, including respect for the country's traditional hierarchy. Cohesiveness was to occur within a familiar model and not within a new, more pluralistic vision of the isthmus. Particularly critical to this project was the creation of a cultural monopoly.

Immigrants received no acknowledgement in this official history, and blacks, whether old stock or newly arrived, were nearly banished from the nation. Regardless of their early arrival during the Spanish settlement and their rapid substitution of the decimated indigenous population, Africans appear very rarely in the novel. They play no part in the author's conception of *mestizaje* despite their demographic dominance during the colony. African slaves and free people of color quickly became Panama's most numerous sectors yet they are almost invisible within foundational fiction (Castillero, 1969 and Mena García, 1984). It is significant that the same deceptions occurred in Panama's official records, including the census of the country's population. Marixa Lasso has noted that in the early twentieth century, "Spanish-speaking blacks were divested of their blackness, converted into *mestizos* while Blackness was reserved for the West Indians." Overall the percentage of blacks fell dramatically in Panama City, despite their numerical superiority before 1903 and the subsequent immigration of thousands of Caribbean workers (Lasso, 2001, 32, 11-12). This group faced growing hostility through the 1930s, and in 1941, suffered a traumatic attempt by President Arnulfo Arias to strip the West Indians of their citizenship. Much as Alfonso Múnera has shown in Colombia's historiography, particularly in its denial of black participation in the independence movements, there were to be no popular heroes in this patriotic narrative, only patricians entirely conscious of their rights and privileges (Múnera, 1998, 13-28). Nuñez de Balboa thus conveys the aspirations of the leading sector, its desire to forward a plan



for national unity while protecting its traditional authority over other groups. In many ways, the novel reflects the broader problems of the republic, its isolation from the isthmus' increasing diversity and its dependence on what George Priestly described as an "exclusionary type of nationalism" (Priestly, 1986, 7).

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