When the Devil Knocks
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I met the Devil dressed in white on his way home from mass in Portobelo, Panama. Celedonio Molinar Ávila (1916–2005) was the most renowned Major Devil in an Afro-Latin Carnival tradition whose practitioners call themselves and their cultural performance “Congo.” An active member of the Catholic Church who regularly assisted local priests with communion, Celedonio confounded my assumptions of “devil.” By the time I met him, children and elders alike had told me stories about being chased through the streets by his legendary embodiment of a Devil character that could jump from roof to roof and corner you at the end of an alley before you firmly committed to going down it, and of secret rituals that made him stronger and faster as “Devil” than he was as “man.” Parents warned naughty children not about Satan coming to get them, but about Celedonio’s embodiment of El Diablo Mayor.

Although my logical mind knew that the Major Devil was simply a character in a Panamanian Afro-Latin Carnival tradition and that Celedonio was the renowned practitioner who had played the role in Portobelo for the better part of the twentieth century, the mystical stories about him led my imagina-
tion down a rabbit hole. Was he sinister? Did he possess mysterious powers? Was he dangerous? Were the stories really real?

The role that the Devil character plays in the Congo tradition is a performance—a framed event, set aside in space and time, with its own script, costuming, props, and movement vocabulary. Yet, well-played roles often leak from the space of staged performance into everyday life. The sociocultural identity most associated with Don Celedonio in local imaginaries was that of Major Devil. He was never only that. After all, he was a devout Catholic, a respected Boy Scout leader, a family man, a “race man,” and an honored community elder. But he was always also “devil.” There were moments, then, when townspeople and visitors, like me, engaged him as Major Devil when he was moving about the world out of character and outside of Carnival season.

As I stood unnecessarily tense on Celedonio’s porch waiting to meet the “devil,” I met the “man.” He was a copper-colored elder of slender build with deep lines on his hands and face that gave him a look of authority and endurance. He walked with a military gait—chest pushed forward, back boardstraight, and head held high on square shoulders. At five-foot-four, I was as tall as or taller than he was. Yet, he cast the bigger shadow. My father has a saying to describe people of commanding presence: “He owns every inch of the ground he stands on.” Even at 85, Celedonio most certainly did.

During that first interview with Celedonio, I asked basic questions about the meaning and significance of the Congo tradition as well as the Devil character’s role within it. I also asked about how the man became the myth—about the levels of transformation Celedonio employed in order to enact such a legendary embodiment. He offered a metaphysical response that I did not understand immediately or in reflection until I engaged it through performance-based theories and praxis. It was a performance-centered approach to critical ethnography that best helped me understand Celedonio’s Devil performance not only as an act of community and an expression of culture but also as an act of faith. It was performance that helped me to make sense of perceived contradictions within the Congo tradition and to locate it at the center of the Afro-Latin community of Portobelo, Panama’s sociocultural identity.

My critical inquiry into the Congo tradition and its relationship to contemporary constructions of “Blackness” in Panama coalesces into three scenes of action: identity performance, cultural performance, and ritual performance. On the page, these categories line up in a neat row, honoring the deliberate spacing that grammatical structures are made to impose. On the ground, however, they do not line up so tidily. They merge, blend, mask, and change places. They anti-structure. That is to say, they “carnival”; they “Congo.”
The Congo Tradition: A Brief Synopsis

Congo Carnival traditions in Panama celebrate the resistance of Cimarrones, formerly enslaved Africans during the Spanish colonial period who escaped to the hills and rain forests of the Americas to establish independent communities. Los Cimarrones assisted English privateers like Francis Drake and pirates like Henry Morgan to successfully sabotage Spanish colonial trade practices. Using these partnerships as leverage, the Cimarrones were able to negotiate with the Spanish to gain their freedom. Once successful, they were no longer “Cimarrones,” meaning “wild” or “runaways.” They were free Blacks, free “Congos.”

Origin narratives surrounding the name “Congo” suggest that it originally functioned as a generic nomenclature, similar to “Negro,” that Spanish colonists used to refer to Africans and their descendants, and that a significant number of enslaved people initially might have been transplanted from the former Kongo kingdoms of Central and Western Africa. While “Congo” was once an explicit ethnoracial term, contemporary practitioners use it to mark a cultural performance traditionally enacted by Afro-Colonial communities as a celebration of their history and culture in Panama.

“Playing Congo” allows practitioners to celebrate and share their history and traditions through a set of ritual performances nested within larger cultural ones. The main drama of the Congo tradition takes place on the Tuesday and Wednesday before the beginning of Lent, the forty days from Ash Wednesday until Easter.

The Congo drama is a mythic battle between good and evil that pits Congos (self-liberated free Blacks) against Devils (brutal enslavers). Like most Carnival traditions throughout the Americas, Congo traditions in Panama rely on a hierarchy of characters. The primary characters include Merced (the Queen), Juan de Dios (the King), Pajarito (the Prince, whose name means “little bird”), Menina (the Princess), Diablo Mayor (the Major Devil), Diablo Segundo (the Secondary Devil), a host of minor Devils, a Priest, one Angel and six souls, a Cantalante or revellín (primary singer), a female chorus, three male drummers, and a multitude of male and female Congo dancers. Through the Congo drama and the language of the Congo dialect, the characters parody the Catholic Church and the Spanish Crown to create an embodied critique of the institution of slavery and its primary agents. Parody, manifested in reversals of meaning as well as reversals of clothing, is a central element of the drama.

Spanish colonialists appropriated the Christian devil as a weapon to wield against enslaved communities. Oral history suggests that they sometimes
used the threat “The devil will get you” to dissuade rebellion and discourage escape. Congo practitioners recognized their enslavers as the embodiment of that threat and repurposed the trope of “devil” as parody. In doing so, they created a narrative that casts enslavers as whip-wielding Devils to be captured, baptized, and sold by communities of self-liberated Blacks powerful enough to do so. They created a narrative that celebrated the history and spirit of cimarronaje—of self-determination, resistance to enslavement, communalism, and freedom.

The Congo drama, also referred to locally as “the Congo game,” does not end until the main Devil, El Diablo Mayor, is de-masked, de-whipped, baptized, and symbolically sold. The ethos of Black rebellion, resistance, and reappropriation, which frames Panamanian Congo traditions in global imaginaries, stems from the cultural context of playing with the devil and winning.