When the Devil Knocks
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Figure 1.1 Preparing for Congo Carnival (Photo by Elaine Eversley)
The narrative of one life is part of an interconnecting set of narratives; it is embedded in the story of those groups from which individuals derive their identity.

—Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember*

In Panamá, Blacks are not discriminated against because they belong to a low social class; they belong to a low social class because they are discriminated against.

—Justo Arroyo, *African Presence in the Americas*

Los blancos no van al cielo, Whites do not go to heaven,
por una solita mañana; for a single reason;
les gusta comer panela they like to eat sweet candy
sin haber sembrado caña. without sowing sugar cane.

—Chorus to a Congo song²

On Friday, May 26, and Saturday, May 27, 2006, I witnessed the inauguration of the first Festival Afropanameño in the Panama City convention center. Supported by the Office of the First Lady, the Panamanian Institute of Tourism, and the Special Commission on Black Ethnicity, the event included twenty booths featuring Black-ethnicity exhibitions, artistic presentations, food, and wares representing the provinces of Panamá, Coclé, Bocas del Toro, and Colón—the areas with the highest concentrations of afropanameño populations. As the Friday celebration reached its apex, a special commission
appointed by former President Martín Torrijos in 2005 presented him with the fruits of their year-long endeavor: a report and action plan titled “Recognition and Total Inclusion of Black Ethnicity in Panamanian Society.” Using public policy advances in other parts of Latin America and the Caribbean to bolster their case (such as Colombia’s Law of Black Communities, 1993; Brazil’s body of laws against racial discrimination, 1998; Nicaragua’s Law of Autonomy of the Atlantic Coast, 1996; and Peru’s Anti-Discriminatory Law, 1997), the Special Commission built on the progress made through El Día de la Etnia Negra (The Day of Black Ethnicity) to open a wider space for the recognition of social, economic, and cultural contributions of Black ethnicity to the nation-building process.

This chapter analyzes twentieth-century Black identity in Panama by examining how two distinct points on a spectrum of Panamanian Blackness came to fit strategically (although sometimes contentiously) under the category “afropanameño” at the end of the twentieth century. The dynamism of contemporary Blackness in Panama exists around the politics of Afro-Colonial and Afro-Antillean identities as they have been created, contested, and revised in the Republic’s first century. In the micro-diaspora of Panama, Black identity formations and cultural expressions have been shaped largely by the country’s colonial experience with enslaved Africans via Spain’s participation in the transatlantic slave trade and neocolonial experience with contract workers from the West Indies via the United States’ completion and eighty-six-year control of the Panama Canal. Blackness in Panama forks at the place where colonial Blackness meets Canal Blackness.

The complexity of Black identity in Panama is evident in the following glossary of terms, which the Commission (Comisión 2006) included in a document it forwarded to the press after the May 26 festival:

Afrocolonial (Afro-Colonial/Colonial Black)
Afroantillano (Afro-Antillean/Black West Indian)
Afrodescendiente (African descended)
Afrohispánico (Afro-Hispanic)
Afrolatino (Afro-Latin)
Afropanameño (Afro-Panamanian)
Diaspora Africana (African Diaspora)
Discriminación (Discrimination)
Equidad (Equality)
Etnia negra (Black ethnicity)
Inclusión social (Social inclusion)
Justicia social (Social justice)
The Politics of Be(com)ing “Afropanameño”

Racismo (Racism)
Tolerancia (Tolerance)
Xenofobia (Xenophobia) (13)

Twentieth-century Panamanian Blackness evolved through a tug-of-war between West Indian and Latino ethnoracial politics, which Norman Whitten and Arlene Torres (1998) would argue translate into négritude versus mesti-zaje forms of nationalism.

When I began this project, I had no interest in the Canal. Knowing little of its history apart from its significance as an engineering marvel, I had no idea about its implications for North American race and trade relations. During the early days of my research, it seemed to be my albatross. Every time I attempted searches on varied combinations of “Panama,” “Blackness,” “race,” “Afro-Colonial,” and “Congo”—the keywords at the heart of my initial inquiry—scores of references regarding “West Indian,” “Afro-Antillean,” “Panama Canal,” and “The Zone” would appear. I quickly learned that little has been published, especially in English, on Afro-Colonial identity in Panama and less on Panamanian Congos.11 It was not until I stopped trying to excavate around the scholarship on the Canal in order to “expose” work related to my topic that I realized the impossibility of studying twentieth-century race in Panama without critically engaging U.S. intervention and the Canal.

Through its “internationalization of Jim Crow”12 and its imperialistic relationship with Panama, the United States significantly influenced the development of race and nationalism in the Republic. As indicated by the terms in the second half of the commission’s glossary, twentieth-century Panamanian Blackness was enmeshed in debates around discrimination, equality, the terrain of Black ethnicity, social inclusion, social justice, racism, tolerance, and xenophobia. This struggle for belonging played out in various historical periods in ways that I will explore over the course of this chapter. Combatants struggling over the terrain of belonging ranged from the Panamanian and U.S. governments, to West Indians and the Panamanian government, to Afro-Colonials and West Indians, to both of these Black-ethnicity populations and the Panamanian government.

The political theorist David Theo Goldberg (2002) contends that central to the constitution of the modern state is “the power to exclude and by extension include in racially ordered terms, to dominate through power and to categorize differentially and hierarchically, to set aside by setting apart” (9). Because moments of heightened nationalism provide opportunities for the state to publicize its criteria for belonging and exclusion, this chapter analyzes
the major discourses that shaped Blackness in four key moments of heightened nationalism in twentieth-century Panama. I refer to these moments as Construction (1903–14), Citizens vs. Subjects (1932–46), Patriots vs. Empire (1964–79), and Reconciliation (1989–2003). Following Ann Laura Stoler (1997), I use “discourse” to mean the intellectual constructs of Blackness, its material practices, and the human agency that moves and molds them (194–95). These discourses not only affected the country’s two major African-descended populations and their relationships to the state but also how the Republic perceived itself.

Common Panamanian attitudes regarding the Canal punctuated each twentieth-century surge in nationalist sentiment and united a politically fragmented populace: anger at being coerced into trading the Canal for (in)dependence, contempt at its control by the United States, resolve to reclaim it, and celebration at having done so—conditionally. The moment I refer to as “Construction” marks the foundation of Panama as an (in)dependent Republic and the construction of the U.S.-owned Panama Canal. “Citizens vs. Subject” is the period during which West Indians associated with the Canal fluctuated between being “undesirable immigrants” and “prohibited immigrants,” and shared a space with the United States as targets of the “Panamá for the Panamanians” campaign of the 1930s. “Patriots vs. Empire” signifies the tumultuous era within which the 1977 Panama Canal Treaty guaranteeing full transfer of the Canal to Panama by December 1999 was signed, and West Indian descendants embraced the classification “Afro-Panamanian” as a tactical method of integration. This was also a pivotal moment in Portobelo history because it is the era when the road was built connecting Portobelo and the Costa Arriba with the rest of Panama. Finally, “Reconciliation” indicates the period within which Panama gained complete control over the Canal; the West Indian Museum of Panama was inaugurated; El Día de Etnia Negra was instituted as a national celebration; and Panama expanded its tourism industry in response to the U.S. military’s departure.

I have chosen to mobilize the cultural anthropologist Victor Turner’s (1982) theories of communitas and social drama as the analytics that drive this chapter. Doing so gives me a performance-centered mechanism to examine how discourses of Blackness were catalyzed in these moments of crisis in ways that either splintered the two main African-descended populations in Panama or united them. His theories of social drama and communitas offer a valuable method for deciphering how Afro-Colonials and West Indians shifted in national, intragroup, and intergroup imaginings of race, ethnicity, class, and nation during the Republic’s first century. According to Turner:
A social drama first manifests itself as the breach of a norm, the infraction of a rule of morality, law, custom or etiquette in some public arena. This may be deliberately, even calculatedly, contrived by a person or party disposed to demonstrate or challenge entrenched authority—for example, the Boston Tea Party—or it may emerge from a scene of heated feelings. (70)

The phases of Turner’s (1982) social drama are breach, crisis, redressive action, and reintegration (9–10). Just as the Boston Tea Party created a breach in the social contract between Great Britain and its American colonists, which is credited with sparking the American Revolution, each aforementioned period begins with a traumatic breach in the social contract of Panama’s national identity. The scope of each period spans roughly from breach to reintegration. Whether Afro-Colonials and West Indians experienced the stages of redress and reintegration together or in opposition depended heavily on their experiences of communitas following these periods of crisis. Turner defines communitas as a feeling of communion that cuts across social divisions such as gender, race, class, age, and so forth. He explains, “When even two people believe that they experience unity, all people are felt by those two, even if only for a flash, to be one. Feeling generalizes more readily than thought, it would seem” (47).

With particular attention on the Congo tradition of Portobelo, Panama, this chapter traces what Paul Gilroy (1993a; 1995b, 19) calls the “routes” of Black identity rather than merely its situated “roots.” How did the dialectical relationship of Afro-Colonial and West Indian identities define Blackness and non-Blackness during these four moments? How did Panama’s two “Black ethnicity” communities create intra- and intergroup antagonisms and solidarities as methods of resistance and survival? How did two distinct African-descended populations, which began the century as Afro-Colonials and Afro-Antilleans, become Afro-Panamanians? What was the relationship between these fluctuating discourses of Blackness and twentieth-century Congo performance?

Feelings of communitas following the first two periods pitted Afro-Colonials and West Indians against one another by using discourses of Blackness to signify (Black) nationals versus (Black) immigrants. The antagonistic presence of the United States and its racist practices facilitated these tensions. By the latter half of the twentieth century, West Indians were more assimilated into Panamanian life and culture. With the agreed withdrawal of the United States and the dismantling of the Canal Zone, Panama’s two national Black ethnic populations began to come together. Furthermore, the Day of Black
Ethnicity offered West Indian communities the opportunity to signal Panamanian-ness and Afro-Colonials the opportunity to signal political Blackness.

I begin each section with an installment of a first-person poem entitled “Citizen Congo” that stitches together knowledge gleaned from archives, histories, interviews, and my coperformance in the field. It represents my situated “awareness” and dialogical reflections on the meaning, purpose, and commitments of Congo cultural nationalism during each era. “Citizen Congo” represents an analysis of and reckoning with the Congo tradition’s sociohistorical position in each historical frame through the medium of performative writing and sets the stage for more in-depth discussions.

Construction (1903–14)

The border alters the way that bodies carry and, indeed, perform themselves not only in the moment of encounter but also for years (and even generations) afterward. Entire cultures have been defined by their proximity to a border or by the border crossing of ancestors.

—Ramón H. Rivera-Servera and Harvey Young, *Performance in the Borderlands*

_Citizen Congo I_

I am
a bold secret—
A steadfast crease
At the center of a
global crossroads—

The melodious exhale
Of a feminine wailing
dancing barefoot
on the edge of agony turned
sweet
Made urgent by
a defiant
mestiza Black
drum beat.

Animal skins
Treated and stretched taut
Over the mouths of
hollowed timber—
a hallowed pact between
generations of warriors
dispersed as wide as
Diaspora
Protected by fierce jungles—
Rebellious vegetation and
African descended bodies
Daring to be free
Together

A port
The tribes of Columbus
Thought beautiful enough
To burden with tons of
fortress rock and canon weight

A port
The tribes of Roosevelt
Blew holes through
To feed the mouth
of a ravenous canal

I AM
The lyrical hopes
Children of a Black Christ sing
in a Spanish litany
for redemption
in a Congo chorus
for revolution

During the Construction period, Panama coalesced as a nation by separating (gaining independence) from Colombia (La Separación) and being separated by the United States. The influx of West Indian railroad and Canal workers at the beginning of the century increased the need to differentiate between Panamanian-Black (assimilated) and immigrant-Black (non-assimilated) African-descended populations. “Afrocolonial” and “afroantillano” became critical markers of both national and ethnoracial identity.

When Panama achieved its (in)dependence in 1903 and continuing well beyond the eleven-year Canal building process, Afro-Colonials and West Indians allied with two different brands of “cultural nationalism.” According to Will Kymlicka (2000), “Cultural nationalism defines the nation in terms of a common culture, and the aim of the nationalist movement is to
protect the survival of that culture” (243). As Spanish speakers living predominantly in the isolated coastal communities of their grandparents and great-grandparents, Afro-Colonials strongly identified with their local towns and regions. Their expression of cultural nationalism, rooted in their experiences as a “national minority,” most often manifested itself as Congo cultural nationalism through participation in Congo tradition(s) and an affiliation with a particular Congo community or “kingdom.” Comparatively, Barbadians, Trinidadians, Jamaicans, and other citizens from the Greater and Lesser Antilles entered the century largely as an “immigrant minority” (242). These diverse groups experienced “West Indian-ness” in Panama through solidarities informed by shared cultural values and traditions as well as shared oppression under U.S. and Panamanian systems of ethnoracial control; and they lived in more urbanized multinational spaces associated with the U.S. Canal Zone. Facilitated by a common English language and a lexicon of racial oppression consistent with that expressed in the post–World War II Black press, West Indian cultural nationalisms connected to what Brent Edwards (2003) refers to as a global “Black internationalism.” Whereas Afro-Colonials’ twentieth-century worldview was shaped largely by Latin American ideologies of mestizaje, West Indians lived in and understood the world primarily through ideologies of Blackness. 

**AFRÓ-COLONIAL (CONGO) CULTURAL NATIONALISM**

Over the next two sections, I show the ways in which Afro-Colonial (Congo) cultural nationalisms and West Indian cultural nationalism shaped each community’s ethnoracial identity. The “routes” of Panamanian Afro-Colonial cultural nationalism are linked to the Spanish colonial period and manifested through the Congo tradition’s cultural performance of cimarronaje.

Some form of the term “Cimarron” maintains currency throughout North and South America as a way to name communities that liberated themselves from servitude, escaped into the hills and rain forests, and established independent settlements. In his book *Maroon Societies: Rebel Slave Communities in the Americas*, Richard Price (1996) defines “Cimarron” as the mother term of the various derivations. According to Price:

The English word “maroon,” like the French “marron,” derives from Spanish “Cimarron.” As used in the New World, Cimarron originally referred to domestic cattle that had taken to the hills in Hispaniola (present day Haiti and Dominican Republic) and soon after to Indian slaves who had
escaped from the Spanish as well. By the end of the 1530s, it was already beginning to refer primarily to Afro-American runaways, and had strong connotations of “fierceness” of being “wild” and “unbroken.” (1–2)

The Congo tradition is a cultural performance that celebrates this spirit of cimarronaje, of “fierceness” and being “unbroken.”

The late ethnomusicologist Ronald Smith (1976) noted that “the most serious battles between the Spaniards and Cimarron bands occurred between 1549 and 1582” (35). Smith discusses two categories of self-liberated African-descended communities. The first are those “who remained fugitives and fought a guerilla-like war in the jungles and suburbs of the major population centers.” The second “settled in villages (palenques) and began to establish a new social order” (37). Following Price (1996), I offer a third, hybrid category, of those who used their palenques as their home base while members of their communities continued to do whatever was necessary to protect them, which sometimes included guerrilla-like warfare and other times trade for mutually beneficial material goods. The Cimarron experience celebrated in Portobelo and throughout various Costa Arriba communities is more closely aligned with this hybrid view. Even as they existed in autonomous communities, Price makes it clear that there was always some form of interdependence between Cimarron communities and colonists to satisfy each group’s basic needs.

As in most Latin American and Caribbean countries, centuries of intermarriage between African, indigenous, and, in the case of Panama, Spanish populations yielded a large mestizo (mixed race) classification. Throughout the twentieth century, the Congo tradition has consistently been identified by the community and the State as a Black performance tradition even though the bodies of its practitioners have been categorized by demographic data as “mestizo.” Four centuries of evolving interchange and dialectical assimilation in a territory the size of South Carolina has rounded the edges of Panamanian Blackness and Whiteness without removing them as opposing placeholders on a spectrum of privilege. Considering “Whiteness” at the apex of privilege and “Blackness” at the base, Afro-Colonial communities remain on or near the bottom, even within the category of mestizo.” As Peter Wade (2003) argues regarding mestizaje in Colombia (and the same could be said of Panama), “Black people (always an ambiguous category) were both included and excluded: included as ordinary citizens, participatory in the overarching process of mestizaje, and simultaneously excluded as inferior citizens, or even as people who only marginally participated in ’national society’” (263).

Origin narratives surrounding the name “Congo” take two potentially interrelated positions: 1) that “Congo” might have functioned as a generic
nomenclature, similar to “Negro,” that Spanish conquistadors and colonists used to refer to African slaves; and/or 2) that a significant number of enslaved people might have initially been transplanted from the former Kongo kingdom of Central and Western Africa. Contemporary Congo practitioners do not place themselves or their tradition in a genealogy of Central African Kongo traditions or in direct relationship to Kongo-derivative traditions in the Americas. This does not negate the connections they celebrate between their tradition and broader notions of African heritage. One of my collaborators, Gustavo Esquina, summarized it this way when I interviewed him on July 25, 2012:

Bueno, en Panamá y en como el resto de todo el mundo, o sea, cuando se escucha el sonido del tambor tiene una relación directa con África. Y entonces los portobeleños somos descendientes africanos, no? Entonces hay una tradición que quedó [. . .] ese pasado que hubo aquí africano y que son los Congos.

Well, in Panama as in the rest of the world, that is, when one hears the sound of the drum there is a direct relationship with Africa. And therefore we people from Portobelo are African descendants, no? Therefore there’s a tradition that remained [. . .] of that African past that was here and are the Congos.

Rather than link the tradition to a specific country or region on the continent of Africa, the community of Portobelo uses “Congo” as a rhetorical strategy to signal a particular trajectory of Blackness in Panama. After self-liberated communities achieved capitulations with Spanish colonists, for example, they were no longer “Cimarron”/run-away. They were freed Blacks/“Congos.” Important work remains to be done in comparing and contrasting Congo ritual and cultural elements in Panama with those in Central Africa as well as other “Congo” communities in the Americas.

Whereas Congo cultural nationalisms celebrate sixteenth-century Cimarron resistance to racial domination in Panama (Price 1996; Rodriguez 1979; Lander and Robinson 2006), West Indian cultural nationalisms are tied to nineteenth- and twentieth-century struggles for national belonging, recognition, and inclusion. As Whitten and Torres (1988) assert, “Like marrons in the interior of Suriname and French Guiana, [Congo] self-conscious historicity is alive with events establishing their own communities, called palenques, in their own territory by their own creative volition” (21). Congo cultural nationalism embraces both Panamanian and African cultural routes and roots.
WEST INDIAN CULTURAL NATIONALISM

The routes of twentieth-century West Indian cultural nationalism and anti-West Indian Panamanian nationalism link directly to the former Panama Canal Zone. Although there had been a documented West Indian presence in Panama since colonial times, the largest population surge came with the construction of the Canal. When construction concluded in 1914, West Indians represented almost half of the total Canal Zone population and ninety-three percent of Canal non-U.S. contract laborers (Brenton 2001, 75; Mitchell 1998, 5; Panama Canal Authority 2002b). In order to understand a particular type of West Indian cultural nationalism born of the Canal Zone, one must examine “The Zone” and its racial discourses.

Logistically, the Canal extended over five hundred square miles from Panama City to Colón and was guarded by a high metal fence. Although both cities remained outside the Zone, the United States was empowered, through a series of treaties, to “keep the peace and provide for [its] sanitation” (Conniff 1992, 69). In 1904 two parallel governments were established: one for the U.S.-controlled space of the Zone and the other for the fenced-off Republic it tore through. The Canal Zone impaled Panama at its core, effectively segregating it from its most valuable resource. The Canal’s Theodore Roosevelt mythology would have us believe that the United States gave birth to Panama when, in fact, Panama was an unhappy surrogate whose geopolitical location and natural resources helped deliver the United States as a leading actor on the world stage. Following from the Monroe Doctrine in 1823 to discourses of “manifest destiny” that began circulating in the 1840s, the creation of the Canal made U.S. imperialistic aspirations unquestionably tangible.

Part of the animosity directed toward West Indians was caused by Canal Zone Jim Crow policies, which not only segregated West Indian workers as “Black” and therefore inferior but also constructed “Blackness” as elastic enough for all Panamanian workers, regardless of ethnicity, to fit uneasily and resentfully alongside them. Although the system of paying salaried workers in gold and day laborers in silver began under the French-controlled Canal, these practices became codified in racial discourses consistent with U.S. Jim Crow laws, translating “gold roll”/“silver roll” into “whites only”/“blacks only.”

Not only did the U.S. system treat Panamanian Canal workers as Black immigrants in the belly of their own country, but also it privileged West Indians over them because West Indians spoke English. Living in substandard conditions, in the staunchly segregated society of the Canal, and paid a fraction of “gold roll” salaries, West Indian workers still received wages almost
double those paid to Panamanians outside of the Zone. Further, the more fluid Panamanian ethnoracial caste system that had produced darker-skinned Panamanian presidents and allowed for greater upward mobility within the system by acquisition of wealth, education, and/or marriage stiffened as a response to U.S. Jim Crow attitudes and legislation (LaFeber 1979, 49–51). For these reasons, many Panamanians, including Afro-Colonials, resented West Indians even though they often both fell victim to the same oppressive Jim Crow attitudes. To make matters worse, the “collusion” of West Indians with the United States through English had rendered Panamanians foreign within their own home country. This enduring sense of injustice exploded into a mid-century nationalist movement that inverted the paradigm, privileging Spanish and unjustly relinquishing the citizenship rights of non-Spanish speakers, thus pitting Afro-Colonial communities against West Indians.

RACE/ETHNICITY/CLASS

Whereas West Indians, the clear majority in the Canal Zone, were confronted daily with a racism that forced them to drink from separate fountains, eat at separate establishments, study at separate overcrowded schools, and watch “gold roll” workers enjoy movie theaters, parks, and other recreational facilities prohibited to them, Afro-Colonials lived in similar situations but not by legal mandate. Afro-Colonial communities, like the Congos, experienced de facto discrimination in the twentieth century with fewer economic and cultural resources allotted to their communities and a negative stigma associated with their darker skin color. English-speaking West Indian communities, on the other hand, experienced de jure discrimination within the Zone (in the form of pay and housing) as well as in Panama proper through fluctuations in their citizenship. Although the two groups’ material realities might have been similar because of their ethnoracial identities, their psychological realities and “racial consciousnesses” were quite different (Hanchard 1991). Afro-Colonials could, at least in theory, achieve the same wealth and prominence as White Panamanians through the acquisition of certain cultural and economic capital. Regardless of status or skill, Canal workers from the West Indies could not. West Indians, therefore, represented a fixed low socioeconomic class because of the rigidity of race as constructed by U.S. Jim Crow policies within the Zone. Afro-Colonials represented a more fluid, although lower, socioeconomic class. Although their ethnoracial identity did not completely forestall their upward mobility, the economic legacies of their enslavement in Panama and the country’s uneven development left them in relative
geographic isolation until the latter part of the twentieth century and without the means to pursue that mobility.24

Peter Wade (1997) explains race as a socially constructed category with material consequences based strongly on phenotype, and ethnicity as a likewise constructed classification based on “culture” (16–17). The United States engineered West Indian and other “silver roll” subordination based on notions of race, while Panama did so based on culture (language, religion, customs, place). Because the two categories are nonexclusive and rely on each other for their meaning, their material consequences are similar. Furthermore, the Republic justified its asymmetrical distribution of resources, which crippled Afro-Colonials’ opportunities for economic and educational advancement, through ethnic/cultural discourses with veiled racial undercurrents. In Panama, as in other parts of Latin America, “nation” superseded “race” whereas the reverse was true in the United States. As Wade argues, “economics, politics, race and ethnicity . . . mutually influence each other . . . economics and politics and social life in general are lived through the medium of culture” (112; italics in the original). “Race” and “culture” produce and circulate within their own unique political economies. Like all currency, their value in local markets is not necessarily the same as their value in global ones. Like the Balboa,25 Panama’s official currency, and the U.S. dollar, which is legal tender in the country, race and culture sometimes stand in for each other and have the same structural effect even though they may have radically different affects.

As a redressive measure, Panamanians collected themselves under a shared hispanicized cultural identity, separate (and forcibly separated) from the Anglo imperial space of the Canal Zone. Panamanians’ euphoric com­munities surrounding La Separación from Colombia and traumatic com­munities at being separated by the Canal Zone helped congeal Afro-Colonials as Panameños. By the same token, the trauma of U.S. Jim Crow policies as well as the negative reception of Blacks associated with the Canal in the broader Republic helped to create a distinct sense of “West Indian-ness” out of a diverse people.

The historian Gail Bederman’s (1995) work as well as the subsequent work of the political theorist David Theo Goldberg (2002) make it clear that the United States used the Canal to help construct itself as White and male partially by strategically constructing Panama and other Latin American and Caribbean nations as Black and/or female. Analyzing cartoons in the pop­ular U.S. press, for example, John Johnson (1980) argues that between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, cartoonists tended to depict Latin America and the Caribbean either as White or fair-skinned women
to be wooed or dark-skinned children, in a Blackface minstrel tradition, to be tamed. The United States, in contrast, was most often portrayed as Uncle Sam or an adult White male politician in a business suit. He writes, “Latin America caricatured as female has been weak, dependent, inadequate, in very crucial ways. Nations and peoples so depicted have been denied characteristics which might have qualified them as equal partners in the hemisphere” (73). Likewise, he states, “The republics were lampooned variously as cheerful, improvident, carefree Blacks, meant to recall the myth of ‘the happy and contented bondsman’ or the popular minstrel of an earlier age” (158). Panama’s symbolic relegation to the status of “Black” and/or “female” is an important factor in understanding the country’s nationalistic itinerary. I assert that anger over this symbolic Blackening and/or feminizing helped move the country toward a mid-century racist nationalism that projected its rage against the United States onto West Indian bodies.

Citizens vs. Subjects (1932–46)

_Citizen Congo II_

I am
Portobelo
The gray haired elder
Soaking his callused feet
in Caribbean salt water
Face painted
with charcoal or indigo
(like a warrior)
Pants turned
inside-out
(like a joke)
Waist
knotted with rope or twine
Tugged by the weight
of a hand-me-down satchel
Heavy with food and rations
Body
Steadied by a thick walking stick—
A tool
for balance and combat
Mouth
Open—
Pouring the ear canals
of moreno y café con leche
Great-grandchildren
So full of experience
that they overflow
the lips with song
and legs with dancing

I am
An old body in newer clothes
When Panamá was
A soldier in Simon Bolivar’s
Gran Colombia
and a slave in Columbus’
promiscuous Spain-topia
I was still
Portobelo
I am the same
But
"Blackness” shifted
elsewhere

[Economic] “Depression” is just a word
like “drought”
It means the same
to cracked, callused feet
soaking in bay water
as it does to limp Hibiscus—
time to migrate

“Elsewhere”
is just a season
away from home
I live in bodies
Not in dirt
What is our dance
But movement

During the Depression era leading up to the World War II, mass unemployment fueled Panamanian anger over the anglophone space of the Canal Zone and threatened the citizenship rights of its workers. Among its effects, the Depression decreased the worth of gold, making the U.S. government's annual payment for use of Canal Zone land less valuable. The burgeoning Republic depended on these funds but found them increasingly insignificant and unjust
considering the property’s benefit to the States. Further, Panama had taken out large loans from the United States to “help underwrite the expense of governing the nation, [which] required monthly service payments of $182,500” (Pearcy 1998, 75). Panama’s annual debt to the United States was more than eight times the $250,000 annuity the United States paid to lease the Canal Zone.

By 1933 silver roll workers outnumbered U.S. gold roll workers nearly four to one (Conniff 1985, 85). Because West Indians made up the greater portion of silver roll laborers, so, too, did they constitute the highest percentage of the unemployed. As resources in rural coastal communities also began to wither, Afro-Colonials moved to urban centers in large numbers in search of work only to find themselves among the throngs of unemployed West Indian workers. Exacerbating the problem, the United States had encouraged a new wave of West Indian immigration in 1931 for a Canal construction project (McCain 1965, 244). Many of these new immigrants joined earlier arrivals as unemployed and unwelcome. With West Indian competition for scarce jobs overflowing the Canal Zone, the resentment toward them and a desire that the United States repatriate some of them reached its peak. The political climate of the 1930s was ripe for race-based and economic nationalisms to reach the level of territorial nationalism, which had been raging since the Canal divided the country.

Two brothers from the country’s interior, former presidents Harmodio and Arnulfo Arias, rode this wave of economic and racial nationalisms in divergent trajectories, although they started at the same root. Long after the wave’s crest, it continued to produce ripples in contemporary Panamanian leadership. Until Harmodio’s presidency, the country’s highest political posts were occupied by an urban oligarchy. Following in his stead, several of Panama’s most charismatic leaders, including General Omar Torrijos (1968–81), who led Panama during the 1977 Carter–Torrijos Treaty guaranteeing the complete transfer of the Canal, rose on a populist platform from the country’s interior rural middle class. Running on the party ticket of her deceased husband Arnulfo, Mireya Moscoso, the country’s first female president (1999–2004), guided the country for the first four years of my field research in Panama and was replaced in May 2004 by Torrijos’s son, Martín.

The common root from which the nationalisms of the Arias brothers sprang was Acción Comunal, a “moderately nationalist middle-class civic organization [that] consisted largely of engineers, lawyers, doctors and various bureaucrats” (Pearcy 1998, 60–61). Founded in 1923, Acción Comunal achieved an unprecedented, albeit temporary, cohesion among the emergent middle class by rallying under a common banner of distrust of the “pro-
American” ruling elite, frustration over the pervasiveness of the English language and the United States’ influence in Panamanian life, and commitment to fostering a love of country, flag, and the Spanish language within Panamanian youth (61). Their slogan was “Panameñismo” (“Panamá for Panamanians”). Attracted by these tenets, the Arias brothers joined the organization in 1930 and participated in the country’s first armed coup, which “ended thirty years of elite domination of the nation’s government” (66) and left Harmodio Arias in the presidential seat. Unlike his brother, Harmodio had a broad base of support, which included and embraced West Indians. He had acted as the lawyer for one West Indian community during an urban renters’ protest and understood their issues as reflective of other members of Panama’s poor and working class. Harmodio’s was an economic nationalism elastic enough to include poor and middle-class populations, regardless of race, negatively affected by the politics of the Canal Zone and ruling elite (68–69). His policies benefited both African-descended populations, and their coalition benefited him. For these reasons, Acción Comunal billed him as “The Poor People’s Candidate.” Moreover, he recognized and tapped into the power of Panama’s vocal student populace by founding the University of Panamá in 1935 to “preserve Panamanian nationality” (75). Once in power, however, he replicated some of the former ruling class’s habits of filling powerful positions with family members and voting in favor of economic benefits for landowners like him, whereas he once had defended the rights of poorer renters (72).

Harmodio had rallied together all poor and middle-class Panamanian residents against the empire, but Arnulfo blamed West Indians for the economic state of poor and middle-class “Panamanians” and demonized them alongside the United States. Using his brother’s economic nationalism as a point of departure, he railed against the English-speaking West Indians who were competing with Spanish-speaking Panamanians for scarce jobs and bloating the country’s unemployment. “For the first time,” LaFeber (1979) summarizes, “demands for radical social change linked up with Panamanian nationalism” (75). Wielded thus, Arnulfo’s brand of panameñismo stripped West Indian citizenship rights and branded them “undesirable immigrants.” Legislated in Title 2, “Nationality and Immigration,” of the 1941 Constitution, this represented the first case of legal discrimination outside of the Canal Zone based on race. 28 Many conjecture that Arnulfo’s racial politics splintered from his brother’s as a result of his stint as Minister to Italy in the mid-1930s during Mussolini’s reign, subsequent audience with Hitler in 1937, and fascination with both forms of fascist nationalism (73). The effects of his regimes 29 on African-descended communities, however, are more aligned with South African experiences than those in Italy or Germany. Just as the former South
African system of apartheid, which was solidified during the same era, trounced cohesion between “coloureds” and “Blacks,” Arnulfo’s panameñismo shattered some of the fragile coalitions between Afro-Colonials and West Indians by embracing the former as citizens under the law and bracketing the latter as subjects of the law.

Although Arnulfo couched his racism in terms of language, which protected Afro-Colonial communities like the Congos from his legislations, his angst involved more than the immigration of non-Spanish speakers. The 1941 Constitution lists as “prohibited immigrants” those who did not add to the “mejoramiento étnico” (“ethnic improvement”) of the country. Translated, this included “the Black race whose native language is not Spanish, the Yellow race and the native races of India, Asia Minor and North Africa” (Constitución 1941). LaFeber (1979) writes:

Arnulfo received strong support in Panama City and Colon, where most of the middle class lived, when he attacked Blacks. The new class was the most anti-Black of all Panamanian groups, due partly to fears of economic competition, partly to a proud nationalism that feared outsiders might mistake their country for a “Black republic.” The very success of the Canal Zone, and its thousands of West Indian laborers, had created a middle class whose anti-Yankeeism and dislike of Blacks formed the basis of Arnulfo’s burgeoning power. (76)

In LaFeber’s analysis, the marker “Black” excludes Afro-Colonial populations, regardless of their history of enslavement and cultural performances. “Black” in LaFeber’s commentary, as well as in official records, signals the West Indian population.

Arnulfo’s spin on panameñismo ostracized West Indians, labeled them as part of the problem, and created a nationalist agenda aimed against all non-hispanicized people. During this period, “race” and “ethnicity” were teased apart; West Indians represented an inassimilable “race” while Afro-Colonials were an already assimilated “ethnicity.” His brand of panameñismo did more to polarize Afro-Colonials and West Indians than any nationalistic movement before or after it. In addition to the violence engendered by making “Blackness” coded as “West Indian-ness” punitive, oral history also suggests that Arnulfo reinforced the divide between the two communities by having Congo groups as well as indigenous groups perform at his political rallies. Although I have not yet found documentation to support this claim, the act would have buffered him from growing criticism about his “racist” nationalism and kept the two African-descended populations divided. Regardless of any critique
that Congo songs might have surreptitiously made against Arnulfo, the spectacle would have visually placed them on the side of his politics for the West Indian spectator. Most studies of this period in Panamanian history acknowledge the differences between the two African-descended groups as though they occurred naturally without attending to the hand(s) that helped legislate their difference—what anthropologists John and Jean Comaroff (1997) would refer to as Arnulfo’s “agentive mode,” which is “the command wielded by human beings in specific historical contexts” (22).

By taking away West Indian citizenship rights during his first brief administration in 1941, Arnulfo legally solidified differences between West Indians and Afro-Colonials and drove a deeper wedge between the two African-descended populations. Afro-Colonials were protected as ethnic citizens while West Indians were rendered vulnerable as racial subjects governed by the law but without the rights of citizenship. This material linguistic accomplishment reinscribed the same type of rigid Blackness that Canal Zone racial discourse had forced onto West Indian bodies. Although the 1946 Constitution restored the citizenship and property rights that Arnulfo’s Constitution took away, the damage to the two groups’ ability to form broad-based coalitions had been done and could not be easily reversed with new laws on fresh paper. The shared trauma of having their citizenship rights revoked created a second reinforcing moment of communitas for West Indians communities.

Patriots vs. Empire (1964–79)

_Citizen Congo III_

I am
Ebony and phonics
Blended with salsa and cilantro
Served on a plate with red beans
And coconut rice—
An Afro-engineered Castellano
An African drumbeat
Kongo-Atlantic feet recognize
Beneath the swirl of a recycled
Spanish pollera

I am
the red devils
Catholic priests sermonized
And Christian Colonizers were . . .
The trickster
Waiting at the Crossroads
With Legba
Wailing like blues
Improvising like jazz
Dancing Diaspora

I am
“Patria”
A bloody brown-skinned girl
Wrapped in a red, white and blue flag
That doesn’t belong to the States—
I have danced in it
Torn my hymen on it
Swaddled my babies with it
Cut it into pieces
Fried and refried it like patacones
And eaten it with ketchup and hot sauce . . .
It is not only mine
It is me.30

Third World revolutionary movements burned a hole in the 1960s that affected global change. Blackness as a social construct with material consequences that subjugates one population to elevate another was at the heart of these struggles. The United States was fighting a hot war in Vietnam, the Cold War with the former Soviet Union, and a volatile race war at home. The Bay of Pigs stood as a David and Goliath parable for Latin American and Caribbean countries struggling against U.S. imperialism. By the time that the January 9, 1964, Flag Riots catapulted Panama to break off diplomatic relations with the U.S. government, the United States was already growing increasingly uneasy about possible coalitions between Cuba and Panama. To make matters worse from the perspective of the United States, seven constitutional governments in Latin America had fallen to military coups since 1961 (LaFeber 1979, 116). Time, space, and circumstance had made it urgent for the States to negotiate a new Canal treaty that would lead to the eradication of the “in perpetuity” clause that had plagued Panama since its inception.

The 1964 Flag Riots marked one of the two critical twentieth-century moments of shared communitas between West Indian and Afro-Colonial communities. Until the 1960s the U.S. flag had flown alone inside the fenced-off Zone, fueling Panamanian anti-imperialist irritation. Shortly before the riots, Panama had gained slight concessions from the U.S. government, including the right to display the two countries’ flags side by side at desig-
nated locations. In other locations, neither flag was to be flown. Several Zone residents resented Washington's concessions and refused to honor them. In accordance with other historical accounts (Conniff 1985; E. Jackson 1999; LaFeber 1979), Don Rojas (1990) distilled the tragedy thus:

On January 9, U.S. students and their parents living in the zone hoisted the U.S. flag at Balboa High School, disobeying the orders of the zone governor, and refusing to allow the Panamanian flag to be flown alongside it. When Panamanian students entered the zone and secured permission to raise their flag, they were stopped by the U.S. students, and the Panamanian flag was desecrated. (21)

The resulting three days of revolts, which extended from Panama City to Colón, ended in more than twenty Panamanian deaths and hundreds of serious injuries.³¹

By the time of the Flag Riots, the Panamanian students from Instituto Nacional who had attempted to hang their flag in the Zone and their supporters were West Indian and Afro-Colonial and fairly representative of the national population. General Omar Torrijos’s road and school projects had not yet linked Atlantic coastal towns with the broader Republic. Afro-Colonial parents wanting their children to get a better education often sent them to live with relatives in Colón or Panama City during the school year. As a result, a small percentage of Afro-Colonials and a sizable percentage of West Indians were either Instituto Nacional students or living nearby at the time of the riot. On January 9, 1964, Panameños living inside and outside of the Zone rioted against Balboa High School. Most of the murdered Panameño protesters were from El Chorrillo, an impoverished, formerly “silver roll” neighborhood outside of the Zone, which had been built to house Canal Zone day laborers (Jaquith 1990, 7). The murder of Panamanian protesters by Canal Zone police caused trauma across ethnoracial lines; West Indians were among those patriots who shed blood and tears. The incident was the beginning of the end of the Canal Zone, as Panama broke off diplomatic relations with the United States for the first time.

The 1964 Flag Riots and their diplomatic fallout set the stage for the 1977 Carter–Torrijos Treaty guaranteeing complete transfer of the Canal. Just as Harmodio Arias had done three decades prior, Omar Torrijos rose to power from the country’s interior, recognizing the unity of the underclass’s struggle and creating a nationalism built on a platform of social justice that challenged the power of the oligarchy. From 1968 until his untimely death in 1981, Torrijos “dominated the Panamanian political scene” (Meditz and Hanratty
b). Born in 1929, “he came from the country’s small but ultra-nationalistic, ambitious, and anti-foreign middle class, the class that first challenged the oligarchy effectively, if briefly, in 1931” (LaFeber 1979, 126). Torrijos took control of the country in 1968 by overthrowing Arnulfo Arias on his third presidential stint, purging the administration and University of Panamá of opposition, and disbanding both the National Assembly and all political parties. Although he admired socialist trends in Peru and Bolivia and established a “mutually supportive relationship with Cuba’s Fidel Castro,” the political label he preferred (and which is most often used by Panamanians to describe him) was “populist” (Meditz and Hanratty 1987b). Having secured his power through an alliance with the National Guard, Torrijos focused his attention on his nation-building projects, which were distinctive in that they focused largely on those who had been “objects of social injustice at the hands of the oligarchy, particularly the long-neglected campesinos” (Meditz and Hanratty 1987b). 31 Through aggressive road-building and literacy and housing projects, he incorporated the rural poor into politics for the first time. He also formed fragile coalitions between historically antagonistic groups like the National Guard and student activists by capitalizing on their shared hostility toward U.S. domination as well as their shared desire for complete access to and control over the Canal Zone (Meditz and Hanratty 1987b; Conniff 1992, 128; Brecher, Nissen, and Barnathan 1981). Relevant to this study, one of his nation-building projects, known commonly as “the colonization of the Atlantic,” created an intra-isthmian migration by guaranteeing to specific interior populations land along the Atlantic coast, the cradle of Afro-Colonial communities and the Congo tradition. The government land distribution included “7,000 hectares of land among 61,300 families” (LaFeber 1979, 134). Torrijos’s road and land distribution projects exposed formerly closed coastal communities like Portobelo to their first major population influx since the early days of the Canal. 33 As Portobelo had done with West Indian migration at the beginning of the century, 34 the community slowly absorbed its newest population into its Afro-Colonial life and traditions through mutual assimilation, intermarriage, and time.

Having ruled Panama for thirteen years through his authority over the National Guard, Torrijos was the longest-standing dictator in Panamanian history and the third longest in Latin American history. “Torrijos’s proudest legacy,” Brecher, Nissen, and Barnathan (1981) conclude, “is the Panamanian flag that now flies over the Panama Canal” (46). Indeed, “It is very unlikely,” attests the Panama historian Conniff (1992), “that the treaties could have been concluded without him” (128). The gradual dismantling of the Canal Zone, which was sparked by the Flag Riots and began taking shape with the signing
of the Carter–Torrijos Treaty, initiated a process of national healing across ethnoracial lines.\(^3\)


The defensive walls around each sub-culture gradually crumble and new forms with even more complex genealogies are created in the synthesis and transcendence of previous styles.

—Paul Gilroy, *There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack*

Appropriation is a key dynamic in understanding race and nation in Latin America.

—Peter Wade, Afterword to *Race & Nation in Modern Latin America*

*Citizen Congo IV*

I am
Community—
A network of families
Able to mobilize
For grassroots resistance
Brandishing
Cultural weapons
In fisted hands
Made for clapping—
Arroz con coco pots,
Duce con leche spoons,
Pans for sautéing pulpo
And banderas de Panamá
Pounding the air with song
Stretched taut to shouting.
Standing shoulder to shoulder with the ancestors
Demanding visibility
Estas Panameña?
YO SOY!
Portobeleña?
YO SOY!
Negra?
*YO SOY! YO SOY! YO SOY!*
Banging
The December 20, 1989, invasion created the second traumatic experience of communitas that affected Panama’s two African-descended populations. Twenty-five years after the 1964 Flag Riots, “Chorrillo was the first neighborhood to be destroyed as U.S. bombers pounded the Defense Force’s headquarters located in the heart of Chorrillo” (Jaqith 1990, 7). In addition to the predominantly West Indian community of El Chorrillo, areas of San Miguelitio and Colón city were destroyed. Based on a report compiled by the National Lawyers Guild (1990) located in New York, “In El Chorrillo alone, sixteen thousand people were left homeless by the invasion.” In a cruel twist of irony, the U.S. invasion not only further devastated the El Chorrillo community, but it also forced residents to seek housing in the very school many had protested adamantly against during the 1964 Flag Riots.

Dubbed “Operation Just Cause” by U.S. Defense Secretary Dick Cheney, and led by General Colin Powell, both working under the first Bush administration, the stated purpose was to oust former CIA informant Manual Antonio Noriega from his dictatorial seat of power. Noriega began his rise to power in the National Guard during Omar Torrijos’s administration. As Conniff (1992) reports, “Noriega served as chief of security, enforcer, and troubleshooter for Torrijos, who once introduced Noriega as ‘my gangster”’ (149–50). Two years after Torrijos’s fatal 1981 plane crash, Noriega assumed control of the Guard, renamed it the Panama Defense Forces, and greatly increased its numbers and might. Like Torrijos, he was never legally elected president of Panama, but his power over the country was unquestionable. Moreover, just as Torrijos had done in 1972, Noriega eventually had himself named “Chief of Government.” “Believing he was in good graces at the White House,” Conniff summarizes, “Noriega built a machine of repression and crime to enrich himself and his cronies” (153). Despite knowledge of his “gunrunning, money laundering, and drug smuggling,” the United States made no effort to intervene in his politics until 1985, when he refused to use his Panama Defense Forces to help bolster the U.S.-sponsored Contras against the Sandinistas in Nicaragua (152). Until that time, despite the Reagan–Bush administration’s 1980s “War on Drugs,” the U.S. government had turned a blind eye to Noriega’s activities as long as his contacts in the region helped “keep the Contra campaign alive” (152).
From 1985 until his removal in the waning days of 1989, Noriega's power became more absolute, his brutality more conspicuous, and his local and global opposition more vocal. Protesters in Panama City often took to the streets banging empty pots or waving white handkerchiefs to express their opposition (Conniff 1992, 156). To justify an immediate military intervention in Panama, President George H. W. Bush claimed that Noriega had declared war on the United States and threatened the safety of the Canal. History has shown Bush's claims to be just as flawed as his son's accusation of weapons of mass destruction that rallied support for his war in Iraq. Although the majority of Panamanians rejoiced at Noriega's removal, local and global observers shook their heads and pounded their fists disapprovingly at the United States' clear violation of international laws in dismantling a monster of their own creation. Noriega was gone, but Panama was again, if only shortly, an occupied country. Moreover, the Canal still kept the country wed to a patriarchal force that had the touch of a sledgehammer. Twelve years after the Carter–Torrijos Treaty, guaranteeing the complete transfer of the Canal by the end of the century, the invasion reinforced the U.S. government's sustained right to intervene in Panama under the auspices of maintaining the neutrality of the Canal. In the end, the war caused approximately twenty-four U.S. deaths and Panamanian fatalities ranging from the hundreds to the thousands (depending on the reporting agency). Eight thousand Panamanian demonstrators called for compensation due to losses and damages caused by the invasion (Weeks and Gunson 1991, xviii).

Carnival season started on January 19, 1990, in the aftermath of the 1989 invasion. In the midst of U.S. occupation, the Congos of Portobelo staged a small coup. Their mayor, the former Panama Canal Zone resident Elaina Maison (pseudonym), had closed the open-air produce market in the town months earlier and sold the land to a couple from the States. She had replaced Afro-Colonial Portobeleña housekeepers with indigenous workers who commuted into town daily. And, most egregiously, she had flown the U.S. flag over the local municipal building. Portobeleña women had had enough. With the help and support of prominent local residents, the Congo women mutinied against the mayor. Wearing their polleras, armed with pots, pans, and loud, angry voices, the women surrounded the municipal building and demanded that Maison step down. Several of the women entered the building, ascended to the Mayor's office, and blended their screaming voices with those on the street. After Maison's daughter and one of the Congas tumbled down the stairs punching and pulling each other, Maison left the building and her position. This was the Congos' indirect response to “Operation Just Cause,” the largest U.S. military invasion since Vietnam, and their direct
response to an injustice in their town. As an organized community, the Congos were able to mobilize quickly and affect local change. In 2004, fifteen years after the Congo coup, Carlos Chavarría, the current Diablo Mayor in the Congo tradition, was elected mayor of Portobelo.

After the national trauma of the U.S. invasion, there were at least four redressive moments of communitas shared between the Afro-Colonial and West Indian African-descended populations: the complete turnover of the Canal to Panama on December 31, 1999, including a dismantling of the Zone; the 2000 inauguration of the Day of Black Ethnicity; the 2003 Centennial celebrations; and the 2006 Primer Festival Afropanameño. The relations between the two populations are not seamless; however, by the end of the twentieth century, the cultural traditions that both groups claim were framed by a shared national homepage. Invoking Peter Wade’s (1997) definition of “ethnicity” through the “language of place” (18), both groups now represented Panameño “Black ethnicity” communities, and both recognized their shared global space within a hegemonic system of oppression based in part on discourses of race.

The West Indian community remains at the vanguard of overt Black political action in Panama. Afro-Colonial communities, like the Congos, enact parodic cultural performances that portray their history of sociopolitical struggle for inclusion and self-determination within Panama. These performances maintain a space to subvert contemporary matrices of power, but they do so more to carve out livable spaces within existing systems than with an agenda for political change. Organizations with divergent agenda are positioning Congo cultural representations to highlight the cultural diversity of the nation, as a vehicle to increase national tourism, and (in the case of the West Indian organizations) to move forward a platform of social justice and cultural enrichment based on the racial oppression of “Black” people in Panama. The Congo community benefits from West Indian calls for social justice; however, without an equally clear agenda and voice, Congo communities risk being flattened into mere representation.

As a part of the 2006 Comisión “Etnia Negra Panameña” report, the organization included information from the 2001 Durban (South Africa) Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance. As J. Michael Turner (2002) notes, it was in the preparatory meetings leading up to the Durban meeting that “Afro-Latin” was “accepted officially into the written documentation concerning the UN Conference.” He continues, “To break away from the commonly accepted racial terms, to reject the mixed-race category and declare oneself Afro-Latino was a courageous
political act, as it represented a defiance of the historic ethnic status quo that defined hemispheric race relations” (31).

Afro-Colonial orientation to Blackness shifted over the arc of the century as a result of U.S. imperialism, the influx of West Indian immigrants, internationalization of Jim Crow, international attention on “afrolatinidad,” and nationalization of ethnic folklore. At the beginning of the century, Afro-Colonial communities were coded as “Black” on the census, demarcated as such by the broader Republic, and likely referred to themselves as such. They became “mestizo” when “Black” was made to mean West Indian, English-speaking, and foreign. Even then, Afro-Colonials remained “Black” in the national imagination.

As Third World revolutions exploded in the 1960s, linking anti-colonialism and anti-racism, Afro-Colonial and West Indian desires began to merge; West Indian hostility regarding their second-class treatment by the United States resonated with Afro-Colonial angst on the same subject. Just as the United States’ intervention largely splintered Panameño Blackness, its withdrawal has helped heal it. Even with the success of revolutionary movements, including Negritude and Black Power, and greater West Indian integration into Panameño culture, a national coming-together of the two African-descended populations would perhaps not have been possible or successful without the dismantling of the Canal Zone.