When the Devil Knocks
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Published by The Ohio State University Press


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Figure 3.1 Blessing the Devil 2013 (Photo by Elaine Eversley)
Baptizing the Devil

Circum-Local Transmission and Translation of Culture

In all cultures, most of the choreography of authority is expressed through the body.
—Paul Connerton, How Societies Remember

If ethnography once imagined it could describe discrete cultures, it now contends with boundaries that crisscross over a field at once fluid and saturated with power.
—Renato Rosaldo, Culture & Truth

El Diablo nace en Portobelo. [. . .] El Diablo se crea en Portobelo.

The Devil was born in Portobelo. [. . .] The Devil was created in Portobelo.
—Raul Jiménez, former Diablo Mayor de Portobelo

As discussed in chapter 2, the contemporary Congo “game” is a parodic bout between the characters of Congos/self-liberated Blacks and Devils/Spanish enslavers. In general discourse, the Congo “game,” “tradition,” and “drama” implicate or directly involve the Devil character. In practice, Congos and Devils have specific costuming, performatives, and rituals that form a distinct ethos for each character. Whereas the previous chapter used Raymond Williams’s dichotomy between official and practical consciousness to analyze the elasticity of twentieth-century Portobelo Congo traditions, this chap-
ter uses what I have coined a “circum-local” paradigm to analyze the ways in which movement, migration, and assimilation have distilled twentieth-century Devil traditions in Portobelo. Congo and Devil traditions in Panama are cultural performances situated in discrete locations but constituted through processes of departure and return. They evolve not just through intragroup negotiations within “home” locations but also through intergroup encounters and reckonings. Following this circum-local process of cultural reproduction, this chapter tracks the cultural contributions and performative innovations of the three primary people who have played the Major Devil role in the living memory of current Portobelo practitioners.

First, I examine the ways in which Celedonio Molinar Ávila, the longest-playing Major Devil in Portobelo, influenced the local tradition mid-century when he migrated to the town from a neighboring community and instituted the Major Devil character as well as the practice of “baptizing the Devil.” Second, I explore the ways in which Carlos Chavarría, the current mayor of Portobelo, earned the right to play the character in the early 1980s and the ways in which his ascent to the role solidified the community’s adoption of Celedonio’s innovation, albeit on its own terms. Finally, I engage the ways in which Raul Jiménez, a Major Devil tapped to play the character from 1982 to 1986 when Carlos traveled abroad to study and who has performed the role at various points since, co-created El Festival de los Diablos y Congos, an innovation that serves as a means of cultural preservation as well as a cultural showcase. Developed to bring Major Devils and their Congo communities together from throughout Panama to Portobelo, the festival extends the time frame for practitioners to celebrate their Congo tradition and offers national and international tourists a unique opportunity to “sample” Congo performances as they exist throughout the Republic.

This chapter concludes with my analysis of a generational shift in the popular interpretation of the Devil character and its significance to the way the tradition is practiced in the broader Republic. This shift was triggered, in part, by the increased visibility and popularity that the tradition has received since the dawn of the twenty-first century. With the following questions in mind, this chapter examines Congo performances as sites of subversion, empowerment, innovation, and cultural preservation. How has the Devil character served as a site of cultural preservation, innovation, and subversion? What is the significance of “blessing” or baptizing the Devil to the Congo tradition of Portobelo and to Congo traditions throughout the country? By what criteria does the Congo community assess the quality of
Major Devil performance, and who has the authority to pass judgment? What nuanced perspectives might a circum-local paradigm offer the study of Black Diaspora cultural production and transmission?

Toward a Circum-Local Paradigm

Whereas Paul Gilroy’s (1993a) “Black Atlantic” and Joseph Roach’s (1996) “Circum-Atlantic” name a trafficking of bodies, performatives, ideologies, and cultural commerce back and forth across the Black Diaspora, I use “circum-local” to name the restless micro-migrations of these same contemporary phenomena within geographically discrete diasporic locations. Black Diaspora citizens travel across the Atlantic when able and/or interested, but they more frequently micro-travel within their home countries or regions, returning to their places of origin with nuanced Black performatives on their bodies, in their mouths, and in their consciousnesses. Inspired by the aforementioned theorists’ focus on the mixing and mingling whereby the New World was “invented” (Gilroy 1993a, 4) in the Caribbean through “flow, exchanges and in-between elements” (190) that constitute identities, I offer “circum-local” as a means to examine the ways Black Diaspora communities, which “are always unfinished, always being remade” (xi), experience other such communities within their own national boundaries through processes of departure and return—city to city, village to village, town to town, neighborhood to neighborhood, and/or between any mixture thereof. While Gilroy uses the chronotope of “ship,” which he defines as “a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion” (4) as a guiding trope in his study, I suggest “bus” as an appropriate spacio-temporal model for a Caribbean/Latin American “circum-local” paradigm. Urban and rural commuters as well as lower- and middle-income travelers throughout the Diaspora rely on this form of transit more frequently than any other.

Like Roach’s (1996) circum-Atlantic model, for circum-local “intercultures,” “performances so often carry within them the memory of otherwise forgotten substitutions—those that were rejected and, even more invisibly those that have succeeded” (5). Roach continues, “The key to understanding how performances worked within a culture, recognizing that a fixed and unified culture exists only as a convenient but dangerous fiction, is to illuminate the process of surrogation as it operated between the participating cultures” (5; italics in the original). Not only have flows and exchanges between circum-local communities augmented or otherwise altered small elements
of the Congo tradition’s contemporary practice, but also some of the elements regarded today as foundational have been drastically altered by micro-diasporic processes of departure and return.

Celedonio Molinar Ávila—The (Re)invention of Culture

Stanislavsky said of the theater, when a person, the public, enters a theater space and sits down and the play begins and they know already how it’s going to end—that is not theater. That is not art. Art should surprise. The art should appear to be a miracle to the public. Like with kids, the public should be on the edge of their seat. Like this. Like this. They follow you. They want to eat you up, right, with all of their senses. So, well, that’s what Celedonio did the first time I saw him.

—Ileana Solís Palma, Professor of Theater, University of Panama, and the first woman to dance Devil in the Congo tradition of Portobelo, Panama

From our first encounter, Celedonio Molinar Ávila drew my attention. It was not his embodiment of the Major Devil character; I did not witness his performance until three years after I first met him. Rather, it was his captivating presence. During my July 2013 interview in Panama City with Ileana Solís Palma, the first woman to train with Celedonio and perform the Devil role in Portobelo, she described his magnetism: “In the West, we think of energy as movement [...] we see that a person has a lot of energy because we see them moving around. No, it’s the energy that comes from inside out and from outside goes in, like a yin and yang. Knowing how to control that is a gift [...] He had that gift. He had the gift to capture your gaze.”

More than the strength of his presence, Celedonio knew how to “story” himself. Like most of the Congo practitioners I interviewed, he spoke about the tradition with great pride, but he also spoke about it with a strong sense of authority. Credited with a major intervention in the tradition, Celedonio revised the Congo game and reinvented the twentieth-century Portobelo Devil tradition.

Born on March 3, 1916, in Nombre de Dios, a town northeast of Portobelo, Celedonio began playing the Devil role in 1939 while still living in his place of birth. He learned the Devil tradition from a Portobelo native named Viudo Ceballos [sic], who had relocated to Nombre de Dios for marriage. According to Celedonio when I interviewed him in 2003, “They [Congos in Nombre de Dios] would play, but they didn’t dress as Devils. When [Ceballos] arrived
there, he organized the Congos and the Devil. He himself dressed as Devil.” Ceballos had been a Devil in Portobelo, so he named himself Major Devil in Nombre de Dios since he was the only local practitioner with knowledge of the Devil tradition. With that knowledge from his experiences in Portobelo, he augmented the tradition in Nombre de Dios. Celedonio continued, “The Major Devil is the one who has the most years of service [. . .] He’s the one who’s been dressing as Devil longest. That’s why they call him the Major Devil.”

Completing the circum-local path begun by his mentor, Celedonio migrated to his bride’s hometown of Portobelo at the age of 29. “I arrived here in 1945 and started to dress as Devil,” he said, “that was when the Major Devil [tradition] was established here. I became the Major Devil here [. . .] I got the title here [. . .] I brought that tradition from there to here.” Portobelo had had a Devil tradition before, but it had not included the Major Devil character. Celedonio returned to Portobelo as the only local Devil who had studied under the first Major Devil. He thus claimed the title of Major Devil and taught local practitioners how to play the Congo game in the way that he had been trained. He explained that “They [had] dressed [as Devils] and put on their Congo costumes, but they didn’t know about the Major Devil. [. . .] They kept dancing, but they didn’t baptize [the Devils]. The Congos and the Devils kept playing with each other. [. . .] So I realized that they weren’t doing it like it should be done.”

Ceballos had taught Celedonio the practice of “blessing” or “baptizing” the Devil as a way to conclude the game. Rather than a practice that he brought with him from Portobelo, “baptizing the Devil” appears to be a unique intervention that Ceballos initiated in Nombre de Dios. Celedonio learned it as a part of his training there and incorporated it into the Portobelo tradition. In doing so, he also migrated the Devil’s dramatic foils, the Angel characters and the Priest. “Before Celedonio, there were no Priests,” Raul Jiménez confirmed in our 2003 interview. “He implemented that. That is to say, that when he got dressed [as Devil], he said, ‘Baptize me, baptize me.’ No one knew [what that was], so he explained about the baptism and from there it began. [. . .] He taught my father [Andres Jiménez] how to baptize.”

No contemporary Portobelo Congo practitioner recalls a tradition of blessing or baptizing the Devil character before Celedonio arrived. Prior to his arrival, Devil characters were merely captured and released to play again until the community grew tired of doing so. Adding the element of baptism gave the Congo game a dramatic arc that signaled when the game might end. It also added another complete “scene” to the Congo drama. In the first scene, the Devil comes to the Palacio on Carnival Tuesday to capture the Queen but
is thwarted. In the second, the Devil seeks to punish the Congos for their defiance and independence by whipping them, but the Angels and Priest help the Congos to successfully defeat him and take away his power. Speaking about how this second scene concludes, Celedonio said, “When they baptize the Devil, everyone donates based on their generosity, like they do in Nombre de Dios. They buy drinks, no money, to have a party that night, and they make a big pot of soup so that all the Congos can eat, and that way everyone feels satisfied because everyone has participated.”

Throughout Panama’s Atlantic coast, Congo communities have incorporated some form of the Devil character into their Congo traditions. “Official consciousness” narrates the character’s existence as though it has always been. However, “practical consciousness” reveals its existence, at least in Portobelo and Nombre de Dios, as acts of migration, imagination, organization, and will. After the road linking the Costa Arriba to the rest of the country was built, the freedom that Congo communities had had in relative isolation to capture one another’s flags, raid one another’s palacios, and play “war” diminished, and the circum-local interventions of Ceballos and Celedonio of having Congos play with and baptize Devils became the contemporary game.

Carlos Chavarría—Mayor and Major Devil of Portobelo

[Regardless of] me being the Mayor, I dance Congo all the same. I take off my shoes and I dance Congo. That’s who I am; it doesn’t make me any difference. I stay the same. I’m still the same Carlos Chavarría. I’m still the Mayor Devil. I’m still the Mayor. You must enjoy the moment.

—Carlos Chavarría

Portobelo native Carlos Chavarría has played the role of Major Devil in the town’s Congo tradition since Celedonio Molinar retired the first time in 1980. During our 2013 interview, Carlos stated, “In 1979, [Celedonio] had played Devil for 49 years, so, in 1980, he decided not to play anymore as he had served seven seven-year cycles.” Those who commit to playing the role of Devil pledge to do so for a seven-year period. After seven years, they may continue as Devil or they may choose to play in the role of a Congo, which has no time restrictions on play. Except for the years he spent studying abroad in Russia (1982–86), Chavarría has continued in the role for over forty years, including playing alongside his mentor for over two decades until Celedonio officially retired in 2003. In 2004 Chavarría was elected mayor of the district of Portobelo. As a long-standing Major Devil and the civic leader of the town,
he has an important perspective on the meaning, purpose, and transformations of the role.

Although Carlos grew up watching Celedonio perform the Devil role, he was not immediately attracted to playing it. Over time, however, it appealed to him. When we spoke in 2013, Carlos described how he came to the role:

When I was a kid in school I dressed as a Congo. But one day, I decided to play as Devil, and my mom told me no. She wasn’t on board with that [but] I told her that I wanted to play. And I wanted it so much that [to earn money for my costume] I had to go out to the mangrove to make coal with a guy called Ricardo Robles. We cut wood and we made an oven […] and from that I bought my first bells and everything else. A sack of coal cost 50 cents. A woman named Melida Jiménez, may she rest in peace, was the one that bought the coal, and from there I bought [what I needed].

I made my first attempt to dress as the Devil. Later, an aunt named Antonia Solio sewed my costume for the first time. She made my costume because my mother wasn’t in agreement. The second year, I had to work shoveling as a mason’s assistant to earn enough to make my costume, and in the following years my mother began to help me […] I began dressing in my costume, and, well, I enjoyed it […] I think my interest was more because some of my friends dressed as Devil and I wanted to play too, so that’s where I stayed, playing Devil.

Whereas young men who choose to play Congo are able to create their Congo costumes by turning existing clothing inside out and fashioning their hats and props out of materials found in nature or around the house, the Devil’s costume requires a jumpsuit, mask, whip, and layers of bells. Like other youths desirous of playing the role of Devil, Carlos had to work odd jobs to be able to afford the materials for his costume, but he did not do so alone. Just as the community would later choose him as their Major Devil, so, too, did various family and other community members choose to help him acquire the resources he needed in order to play. From the creation of one’s costume through the execution of the game, Congo/Devil culture is communal.

In addition to the attraction of dressing up and performing the Devil role alongside friends, Carlos’s attention and curiosity were captured by the Devil’s mask and the insider/outsider perspective it provided. Speaking about the experience, he explained:

When I played Devil the first time, what most caught my attention were the masks. When I wore the mask, I saw people run and be afraid, and inside
of the mask, I laughed. From the outside one cannot see the face inside. [The Devil wearing the mask] can enjoy what is happening. Also, when you [see] the Congo playing with the Devil, it is graceful and you see how the community celebrates it. That fills me with satisfaction and emotion. That is the great thing that this tradition has given me. So, that is what most attracted me to it and what most makes me play Devil.

Wearing the Devil’s mask allowed Carlos to experience what Du Bois (1994) described as a sense of double-consciousness, of witnessing the world through his unique first-person perspective as well as through the third-person perspective of Congo co-witnesses. However, unlike Dubois’s concept of “the veil,” which he posits created a psychosis in Blacks by simultaneously allowing them the perspectives of the bodies they animated, which were as capable and deserving as those of Whites, and to witness themselves through the stifling perspective of their oppressors, playing Devil afforded Carlos the opposite view. He could move within a veil of power, a parodic veil of Whiteness, watching those around him responding as if the construct were real, all the while knowing his own limits and the necessary illusions that were designed to perpetuate and amplify the community’s perception of his power. Having previously played the role of Congos/Blacks, Carlos was even more aware of how to project the type of Devil embodiment that would meet the community’s expectations of how the role should be played.

Respect is an important principle regarding how one embodies the Devil. To be respected as Devil, especially as Major Devil, one must maintain the performative integrity of the role, play the Congo game with commitment and finesse, and honor the rules sanctioned by the Congo King and Queen that govern how the Devil character interacts with Congo characters. In discussing his ability to maintain the community’s respect, Carlos talked about the ways in which he stays in character until the Congo game and drama are complete:

I walk backwards into my house and I take off the mask, and because of that I have always maintained the respect [of the people] because I only take my mask off in public after I have been baptized. I mean, the local people all know who I am, but the tourists ask, “Who is that? Who is that? Why does he not take it off?” Not until the moment I am done do they see me. During the game, I try to remain incognito with people because it is important to retain that respect. And I have noted that since I took my position as Major Devil, I have maintained my respect.

Carlos’s refusal to break character enhances the game’s enjoyment for all practitioners. Staying within the movement vocabulary of Devil, and retaining
his mask until baptized allows Congo practitioners to immerse themselves in the world of the game, including the anticipation and fear of being confronted by a whip-wielding Devil. Speaking about the difference between community members’ everyday interactions with him compared with their responses to him as Devil, Carlos said:

The people sincerely respect me as Devil [. . .] I have seen that sometimes I am here in my house not dressed [as Devil]. People will be playing up there [at the fort]. I will go up there to watch for a while, and the kids will come by while I am there. [But] the moment I dress as Devil and go out, I see that everyone moves aside, and I wonder why that is. It is because the people are scared of me? I don’t know why because I don’t mistreat them; I just go out to play with them [. . .] and when the game begins, they come out to play with me. But they fear me, from the smallest ones to the biggest. Why? I do not know. I have acquired the respect of the group, and I have maintained it, thank God. In terms of the tradition, I have maintained it.

The emotional range that Carlos arouses between fear and respect is not born of impending bodily harm or mistreatment. Rather, it reflects his ability to create suspenseful anticipation and tension through the way he dances and carries himself as Devil. Carlos learned this sense of performative integrity and finesse by watching his mentor, Celedonio, perform the role. During our interview, Carlos reminisced about one of the ways his mentor captured the community’s imagination and interest:

When I was young, I would see that the older people were scared of Celedonio. They were scared of him when he played Devil. Even the youngest among us, we would go running away from him. Later, I noticed that all of the houses here in Portobelo were right next to each other. So here, facing the church, there were various houses that people would play in front of, and I do not know how he came to jump on top of the roof, but he went running from roof to roof. I was surprised. Everyone in the village said he could fly! And I did not see that, but I did see him running from roof to roof. Well, of course, between the houses there were alleys, so he would jump from one roof and land on the other side. Yes, I witnessed that personally.

Growing up with the model of Celedonio’s embodiment of the Major Devil helped to emphasize for Carlos the importance of performance over force in garnering the community’s respect and in sustaining their excitement about the game.
Carlos's virtuosity with the Devil's dance movements as well as his overall manner of playing the game led the Congo community to select him to succeed Celedonio as their Major Devil. This manner of passing the baton was not aligned with the selection process that Celedonio had brought with him from Nombre de Dios. During our 2000 interview, Celedonio asserted, “The people can't choose the Major Devil. [. . .] The Major Devil isn't named that way. It's earned. It's a school. [. . .] I appoint the Major Devil. It's earned.”

Carlos had apprenticed under Celedonio with other Devils, but he was not next in line to become Major Devil when Celedonio retired. So, the community intervened. After adopting the practice of baptizing the Devil, which Celedonio had introduced, as well as absorbing into their local tradition the additional characters required to perform the baptism, Portobelo's Congo community also expressed its agency in determining who would play the pivotal role of Major Devil. Carlos described the initial, improvisatory selection process, which occurred at the conclusion of the 1980 Carnival:

When we were playing Devil, there was a man called Francisco Amoreti, and it was thought that he was the one to be the next Major Devil. When we were getting baptized, there was no one left but him and me, so I went out to play with the Angels and the Congos. And they said to me, “Not him, you.” And the Angels said to me, “Not him, you.” And I am asking them, “What is going on?” And they tell me there is going to be a duel [i.e., a performance competition] between [me] and Pancho [Francisco Amoreti] [. . .] So they created a duel between him and me. The advantage that I had over him was that he was deaf, but I knew that he still played Devil very well and I recognized that. So, I told the Congos to render unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s if he is the Major Devil. And they said no. There [was] a duel, and when we started playing he did not hear the music and could not follow the rhythm, and that was to my advantage. And I have been able to play from 1980 until now as the Major Devil.

Carlos's ascent to Major Devil at once marks the success of Celedonio's circum-local cultural intervention and the friction that often comes when a cultural innovation shifts from the exclusive control of its creator to that of its host community. Beyond that initial intervention, the Congo community continued to tweak the “official” rules of the game in order to honor their desires about how it should be played. During our interview, Carlos discussed his choice to study abroad and his assumption that choosing to do so would mean forfeiting the role of Major Devil:
In 1982, I went to Russia to study. So I did not play in 1983, 1984, and 1985, until I came back in 1986 and was motivated again to play Devil. I knew that there was another person [Raul Jiménez] playing Major Devil for me, and I gave it to him, but the Congos told me, “No, you were on vacation. You have come back to your culture, and these years [when you were away] count.” I told them, “No, Raul is here.” They said, “No, you are the Major Devil.” It was like they gave me a license to study and they kept counting the years.

The community considered Carlos’s time away to be a sabbatical, allowing that time to count toward his total years of service as Devil. As previously noted, practitioners who commit to playing the Devil role do so for seven-year periods. These periods may be served consecutively, as Celedonio did, with the goal of retiring at the end of a seven-year multiple. Talking about his own future, Carlos continued:

Unfortunately, [in 2013] we had to suspend the games because of a few security problems that happened in the district [but] I will play next year and, God willing, I’ll reach 42 years of playing Devil [. . .] I do not know if I will achieve 49 years of playing Devil like my ancestor Celedonio, may God keep him in His glory. He played seven seven-year cycles in a row [. . .] I do not know if I will achieve [that], seeing as how he had more strength and everything, but you know that the minute you dress as Devil and you have the gift and responsibility to be the Major Devil, you have to try to do it as best as possible [. . .] [to] maintain the tradition so that the people respect you and you respect them.

Raul Jimenez and El Festival de los Diablos y Congos

Like Carlos, the Portobelo native Raul Jimenez was raised in the Congo tradition remade by Celedonio with the existence of the Major Devil and the practice of baptism. Raul’s father, Andres, was one of the first practitioners to learn the role of Priest, which Celedonio also introduced. Raul’s older brother, Fernando, once played Pajarito, and his younger brother continues to play as a Devil. Even though members of his family played various characters, that Raul would perform as a Devil was far from predetermined. As he explained during our 2000 interview, he came to the Devil character by way of a prank:
It was practically like a joke. What happened was, back in those days, the Congos had their own rules, no? They were strict about their rules. So, I stole a cane from one of them [and after that] each year [during Carnival] they would chase me. I could not be relaxed anywhere [. . .] In order for me to have some safety, I started dressing as Devil, and here I am. I was really interested in the game [. . .] I went to the home of Mr. Celedonio Molinar, who was the Major Devil [. . .] and he taught me how to play Devil. When Carlos went to Russia, [. . .] I was left in charge.

Although he initially chose to perform the role as the solution to a problem, Raul has continued to participate in the tradition as Devil because of the sense of presence that playing the game from the vantage point of the Devil affords him. He explained:

I like it because it gets me directly involved with the Congo—I mean, I arrive at the center of what is Congo [. . .] When I go out, there is a tension [. . .] At the time that I go out, which is midnight, the whole world has that tension: Here comes the Devil. Who is the Devil? When is the Devil coming? And when they hear the Devil—that is, [when] the Devil grunts in the street—the people stay there; they live in that moment. [. . .] Congo and Devil, I mean, they are tied together.

Having served as Major Devil in Portobelo during Carlos’s absence from 1982 to 1985, Raul not only continues to act in the role when called upon, but also he has made a lasting contribution to the tradition by conceiving of and helping to implement one of the town’s largest festivities. In 2000, he partnered with the photographer Sandra Eleta, the visual artist Noel González de Carrera, and a committee of Congo practitioners to found El Festival de los Diablos y Congo. Planned as a biennial celebration of culture and history, the Portobelo-based festival attracts Devils and their Congo communities from throughout Panama for a day-long showcase of each community’s talent and skill.

Raul and others in the community feared the deterioration of the Congo tradition, especially the significance and meaning of the Devil character, and so planners organized the festival as an intervention into cultural erosion. During each festival, Congo “kingdoms” have an opportunity to share, borrow, and critique various ways of embodying the Devil characters and enacting the Congo/Devil game that exist within hours (in some cases minutes) of their home communities. This cultural intervention harks back to the days before the construction of the Costa Arriba road when Congo communities
visited one another as part of the game and restores an important aspect of the Congo tradition’s circum-local praxis.

Unlike presentations for tourists, which are intended primarily for an outsider’s gaze and do not include Devils, the Festival of the Devils and Congos not only features the Devil character but also depends on Congo community spectatorship, approval, respect, and engagement in order to succeed. Each kingdom’s royal court, primary singer, chorus, and drummers take turns performing on an elevated stage while their Devils and male Congos exhibit a portion of their Ash Wednesday performances in front of the stage. Because practitioners generally are in their home communities during Ash Wednesday ritual celebrations, they do not get to observe the full array of Congo characters active in neighboring communities. The festival allows them that unique opportunity. Congo ritual specialists from Colón, María Chiquita, Palenque, Nombre de Dios, Puerto Pilón, Viento Frío, Portobelo, and other regions along the Atlantic coast as well as Congo communities from throughout the country showcase their talents, skills, and particular styles of Congo performance for an immediate audience of other practitioners and an extended audience of national and international spectators.

Just as respect is an important element in maintaining the integrity of the game between Devils and Congos within their home communities, each
community’s adherence to an overarching set of ethical principles maintains a spirit of play, celebration, and good-natured rivalry during intergroup play. Communities entering Portobelo for the Festival de los Diablos y Congos do so understanding that they must submit to the local community’s rules. Accordingly, visiting Major Devils subordinate themselves to the Major Devil in their host community. Carlos discussed this aspect of the tradition during our 2013 interview:

When all the young people come to play Devil for the Festival of the Devils, they all know who the Major Devil of Portobelo is and we all talk and play together. But if I were to go to another community, I cannot be the Major Devil because that community has one already so I have to be under the rules of the Major Devil of that community. In that moment I would be a junior to him [. . .] I would have to ask him how they play Devil there, what are the rules, and I have to stick to them. It is the same as every community having a fort, and you have to follow the rules of the King and Queen [of that fort] [. . .] When others come here, they ask me what the rules are. They submit to the style that the Congo reign [King and Queen] has given me directly because the [rules of] Devil play are what the Congo reign has outlined. We submit to whatever the Queen and King say in order to maintain the tradition. It’s because of that that I tell them, “Sirs, you know how this game is. We do it with respect. Do not abuse it.” And that is truly why you have seen here, that no one gets hit [with the Devil’s whips] here during the Festival of the Devils. You’ve seen the quantity of people that come here to play, and [the Devils] don’t hit anyone. [Play during the festival] is really a game with a different style. It is not like our Ash Wednesday [during Carnival]. Ash Wednesday is the game where the whip comes into it.

The rules of play established by the Portobelo King, Queen, and festival organizers allow Devils to display their whips, but disallow their use. This helps to safeguard against unintended consequences.

More than a “showcase,” planners designed the Festival of the Devils and Congos as an opportunity for discussion, education, and mentorship. Each festival includes 1) opportunities for local youth to apprentice under established artists working within the Congo aesthetic in set design, mask-making, and general costume preparation prior to the festival; 2) a free public exhibition held on the second floor of Portobelo’s colonial Customs House of art and history related to some aspect of the Devil tradition; and 3) set-aside moments during the festival for younger and more established Devils to talk among themselves. These experiences combat the cultural forgetting
that elders within the tradition fear and extend young people’s network of Congo friendships throughout the Coast. In this way, El Festival de los Diablos y Congos serves as both a larger cultural performance honoring Cimarron history in Panama and a meta-performance about Panamanian Congo performance.

Some members of the religious community in Portobelo see the festival as an act of defiance that attempts to extend Carnival season further into Lent; given the history of the Carnival tradition, their assumption is likely valid. Although all Carnival activities in other parts of the country conclude on Ash Wednesday, the Portobelo festival gives celebrants one final opportunity to play Congo a week or two after Ash Wednesday. In 2003, the year of the country’s Centennial, the festival had one of the largest audiences of any public event in Panama, attracting over five hundred Devils (nearly twice the population of Portobelo) from throughout the Atlantic coast, along with their Congo communities and more than six thousand spectators (Meneses 2003, 58).

The event’s success can be credited to the inclusion of Devils from throughout the Atlantic coast in its planning as well as to support from a wide range of local and national sponsors, including Panama’s National Cen-
tennial Committee, the Spanish Embassy, the National Institute of Culture, the National Institute of Tourism, and the University of Panamá, as well as corporate sponsorship from one of the largest communications companies in the country, a major grocery store, and a major beer brand.

More than simply measuring other communities’ performances against their own, Congo members also look for material markers of distinctions in their fellow Congos’ histories and, conversely, use physical markers to raise questions regarding their neighbors’ histories. The distinction that generated the most speculation among those who witnessed the 2003 festival was one Congo kingdom’s performance by two Pajaritos, one male, the other female. The pair performed synchronized mirror movements, jump-dancing with their arms extended as in flight and their legs bent low while blowing their whistles to accent each step. Portobelo Congos wondered if the female Pajarito was a contemporary addition, or if she signaled a Black female interlocutor in their history who had served as a lookout or a messenger alongside a brother, father, mate, or compatriot.

As the event concluded, several teenaged Devils began strategizing their masks for the next year. Although younger Devils are often drawn to the abil-
ity of larger masks to capture the attention and admiration of the spectators, Carlos discussed the virtues of traditional masks at length during our 2013 interview without disparaging younger members’ choices:

In respect to the masks, I have seen that they have made a lot of changes. You will see big, extravagant masks that the young people are creating. I do not criticize them because the creativity of the old days is not the same as now, and that is good. That is what I tell the older people. [. . .] Before, we used to make the masks, [and] I still stay with a traditional mask, a mask resembling an animal or any other kind of design, but small. It lets in good ventilation so you can breathe well [. . .] We would make a mud mold. We would cover it with newspaper and a paste that we made from wheat—we would boil it and make a paste [. . .] We would use that to stick on the newspaper. Afterward, we would put the mask in the sun for one or two days. We would take out the mold and leave the paper mask drying until it hardened. From there we would cut it and start to decorate it, paint it, and put whatever we wanted on it. That is the way our masks were [. . .]

[As the years passed,] I decided not to make the ones from mud molds as they take a lot of time. I would get cardboard. It [covers] half my face and from there I would design it and add decoration to it. I would go out with my mask—it was more lightweight—and that is how I would go out to play [. . .] [Younger Devils] ask me, “Why don’t you play with a bigger mask?” (Laughs.) I tell them that I see when you all [who play with large masks] all lower your head and raise it [. . .] two or three times [and] have problems with [your] neck. Not me! With my mask, I can raise and lower it and I do not feel a thing. [Large masks] weigh a lot. It is for that reason that I do not want a big mask. Leave me with my traditional small mask, and I play all I want. I have kept it this way, and they respect my decision. And what is more, sometimes after I am finished playing Devil, some of them come to borrow my mask to go do a [Congo] presentation. Even my son has borrowed my mask. He takes mine and he takes his. When he is tired, he takes his off and puts mine on. But yes, the ones of today are exaggerated. You have seen them in the Festival of the Devils, those big extravagant masks that the young guys make. And we have told them: six hundred and something guys will come here dressed as Devil and, truthfully, one mask looks like the other. But they are not the same; you can see the difference in creativity that the guys have, you understand? There are people that take up to two or three months making their masks because a lot of them sew the decorations with a sewing machine. They do have their creativity.
Chapter 3

The festival has had two unintentional consequences. One has been that it perpetuates the fascination that many young people have with the grandeur of some of the Devil costumes. They mistake them as markers of successful Devil embodiment rather than the performers’ attention to rituals of preparation and dance movements. The other unintended consequence has been in greatly increasing the number of practitioners who play the Devil character in any given community while reducing the number who desire to play the role of Congo dancers or other characters. Nonetheless, people continue to participate in the tradition and, like their predecessors, make adjustments to it that favor their aesthetics, interests, and methods of play. As long as these adjustments do not violate the rules of the game as set forth by the King and Queen, practitioners are free to add their own unique innovations without fear of dishonoring the game.

Among the three “scenes” of Congo performance, the “local” and “circum-local” esoteric performances are most active in cultural preservation and community building, while “like-local” performances package the tradition for consumption for a more conservative global exoteric public. Throughout each of these arenas of spectatorship, Congo practitioners are agents and witnesses watching just as actively as they are watched and attempting to control how they are engaged. Further, Congo “circum-local” performance traditions like El Festival de los Diablos y Congos bolster a more public sense of “Congo nationalism.”

The End of an Era: Celedonio Officially Retires as Major Devil

In the midst of Panama’s Centennial, Celedonio Molinar Ávila, the man who introduced the Major Devil character to the Congo tradition of Portobelo and served in the role for 49 years, officially retired. Such a momentous occasion demanded the audience, spectacle, and flair that the Festival of the Devils and Congos provided. Carlos recounted his memory of that moment during our 2013 interview:

The last time that [Celedonio] played with us was for a Festival of the Devils [here] in Fort San Jerónimo. They did an homage to him. [. . .] He was so emotional in that moment to see all of his colleagues who had come from all around to play with him, and when the group from Portobelo entered to play with him, it was so emotional for him that he began to cry. [. . .] It was really strong, the emotion that he felt.
The highlight of the 2003 festival was Celedonio’s march from the fort’s entrance to the middle of the space in front of the stage. Amid an onslaught of camera lights and cheers from the estimated six-thousand-member crowd (more than twenty times the number of people living in Portobelo), Celedonio danced, posed, and was saluted by fellow Devils. That was the front-stage finale. As Carlos detailed, the backstage finale did not occur until 2004:
The next year we played again, and he was a judge. He judged the dance and cross of the Devil [. . .] The young people who were playing did not know what he was judging them on, so he explained: it is not about the mask; it is the dance and the cross. The kids did not know. So we suggested [that the judges] not give out prizes because that was going to damage the essence of the game. It is better not to give out first, second, or third prize; it is better that it just be about participation. So [Celedonio] was playing, [. . .] and he was very excited. I was outside. I was not dressed [as Devil] [. . .] and they sent me in to look for him. He was totally possessed by the game—in plain clothes, totally possessed, transformed. You saw the transformation in his face. And they called to me, “Hey, you, careful.” They said, “Since you are replacing Celedonio, you go and play with him.” When I arrived and saw him, I asked, “What has happened to Celedonio?” He did not answer me. “Cele!” I saw that he heard me, but he did not answer. Yes, the man was totally possessed in that moment, and we played together [. . .] me in plain clothes and him in plain clothes, but we kept up the grunts and behaving as Devils. And there came the moment when the encounter was so strong (he had taught me some things, some steps) that I had to use them with him directly, and I do remember what he said to me—“Hot water.” I said to him, “Hot water, hot water, hot water.” “Hot water” in the Congo culture—excuse me, Devil culture—means “I am angry; I am mad.” [Celedonio] ended by telling me that he was mad, “I am hot!” So it was a challenge between us. We looked at each other intensely, and when the pressure lessened he said to me, “You are ready to replace me.” I did not think that was what was going to happen, but it is what he wanted, to shed himself of his power and transmit it to me. But I do not play with secrets [. . .] A lot of people cried that day [. . .] After that he did not play anymore. Occasionally he would do a short presentation on Ash Wednesday with his sons [. . .] but he did not keep up the tradition of playing every year because he had retired.

**THE DEVIL, MAKING A CROSS WITH THE BODY, AND BEING BAPTIZED**

Of all the Devils I have witnessed in Panama, Celedonio’s costume and mask were the most modest. He used the same type of mask throughout his career. It was made of cardboard in the mold of half of a hollowed-out calabash, painted, adorned, and tied around his head with two strings. Yet, in his time, he was the most respected and feared of all Devils. During our 2013 inter-
view, Ileana Solís Palma summarized it thus: “His costume wasn’t anything spectacular. It was just a cardboard mask and cardboard wings. But I couldn’t stop looking at him. I said, who is that Devil? I mean, how he jumped, the energy that he has. It’s something that you can’t stop looking at him.” Celedonio believed that the Devil character’s physical embodiment, not his whip, was his most powerful tool. As Devil he moved slowly, then exercised sharp, precise dance movements with strategic bursts of energy. He bounced, one foot crossed in front of the other, ankles layered in cuffs of bells; one arm stretched forward, the whip-arm stretched back; bells jingling ominously. As he moved forward, he intermittently jumped, crisscrossing his feet mid-air. One of the most important elements of the Devil’s movement practice involves creating and maintaining the form of the cross with one’s body. Carlos discussed this during our 2013 interview:

I am always trying to make a cross with my body, and that is what [Celedonio] was trying to say. [. . .] You always have to create a cross and walk, [but] do not walk straight. [. . .] That is to say, always find a way to make
[your body or movements] the cross since you are imitating the man of darkness. As you are imitating him, you should do everything [like invoking the sign of the cross to protect yourself]. Walk bent over, because then you are in a better position to create a cross with the body and that gives the game greater acceptance because when you walk straight up like that your Devil performance loses respect.

Part of the suspense generated through the Congo game is the community’s sense of playing at a crossroads between good and evil that might open a space for the real Devil to enter. As such, community members take various precautions. Male Congo practitioners keep a “cross” on their bodies through part of the game’s parody. They wear their trousers and jackets “crossed,” meaning inside out, as part of their costuming. Female Congo practitioners are encouraged to wear some intimate clothing inside out, and the Devil character dances with his “cross” in/as his body.

“THE END OF THE MAGICIANS”: THE BEGINNING OF A NEW ERA

Unlike those who have succeeded him as Major Devil, Celedonio observed the prior tradition of going off alone to engage in ritual preparation, including mixing special herbs and reciting special prayers. These practices generated an air of ritual sacredness and mystery around his embodiment of the character. As Sandra Eleta, co-founder of Festival de los Diablos y Congos, shared during our January 3, 2003 interview, “There was some magic about [Celedonio as] El Gran Diablo. When he would get dressed, he would go to the other side of the bay, and everything was, like, sacred. He would never show up in town before he got dressed, and people even said that when he was at his house, the roof would shake.” Remarkable stories abound about the heightened abilities that Celedonio appeared to possess when he transformed into the Devil character. As discussed in the previous chapter, Celedonio credited part of his ability and energy to his practice of enacting the Devil character’s “pujido” or grunt, which taps into an internal power that one may not realize that he or she possesses. However, Celedonio and those closest to his Devil praxis talk about the possibility that he tapped into something deeper as well. When we met for an interview on February 10, 2004, Sandra spoke of Celedonio’s embodiment of Major Devil as an “existential compromise”: 
He was more existential. He was totally compromised [. . .] not with his role but with his being as a big Devil [. . .] He recited all the prayers—all the “Perro Negro” [prayers]. Everyone would be totally afraid of even saying the name “The Perro Negro,” and he would dare to pronounce the big prayer of the Black Dog [. . .] you are not supposed to say that prayer if you don’t want to deal with the [“real”] Devil [. . .] Celedonio would use that prayer [but] no one else wants to know anything about it.

Those who have come after Celedonio fear the implications of such mysticism. They resist this type of “compromise,” and avoid some of the old rituals. Both Raul and Carlos reflected on the Major Devil character as Celedonio chose to embody it with this sense of existential compromise. During our 2000 interview, Raul began his reflection by stating that “the Devil has a mystery.” He continued:

That is, we see that when I grunt, I am challenging the other Devil, the Devil of . . . the [“real”] Devil Lucifer. When I grunt, I am imitating him with that grunt, right? So then when I leave my house, I grunt three times before leaving. [. . .] It's like calling to the Devil forcefully, right? So then when you go out, [. . .] he, on the third [grunt], sometimes he answers you. So that sometimes I'm left with [Lucifer’s] grunt, right? And we go playing from there. That's the mystery that sometimes a lot of people won't tell you. Well, I don't play that game, but various ones that have, like Celedonio and before Celedonio, those people would go up into the mountains to dress as Devil. When they would come down and walk, one could feel the earth shake. It's like a force, yes, from the other side, to represent the real Devil [. . .] People aren't going to tell you that because it's something that they have hidden. One can feel a force inside of you. The moment that you get dressed as Devil, you feel like you’re another person, a total other person.

When we spoke in 2013, Carlos shared an experience that echoed Raul's characterization of the pujido and Sandra’s discussion of the prayer:

One year I went dressed as Devil to [Celedonio’s] house to play with him. He would always get dressed up in the mountain, but this year he said he was getting dressed at home. He said, “When you come to get me, when I give the second grunt, move away from the door.” He grunted the first time, grunted the second time, and it was normal, but when he grunted the third
time, it was like a force shot out of him, like a spring that he had pushed outward. And it left me wondering, what was that? [. . . ] I also remember that Celedonio, may he rest in peace, told me one time, “You play very good, but something is missing.” And I asked him, “What is it?” And he said, “I’m going to tell you a secret.” And I told him, “No, no, no, no. I play from emotion.” And he said, “Yes, but I am going to tell you a secret.” And I said, “But a secret about what?” He said, “A secret prayer.” And I told him, “No, no, no, no. Excuse me, I do not know what kind of prayer you want to give. No, no. I play from emotion. I do not use any prayer. I play from emotion and, when I do not want to play anymore, I will quit. I do not want to make a pact with anyone.” He said, “No, but—” I told him, “Excuse me. I respect you and everything, but I play for emotion. When I do not want to play anymore, I will simply retire and not have any commitment with anyone.” And that is how I have kept playing. Yes, that is exactly how I have stayed, thank God.

Ever curious, I can’t help but wonder what might have followed Celedonio’s “No, but—.” Ever cautious, I never asked Celedonio about the prayer or this sense of compromise directly. The ethnographic challenge of serving as a co-witness is the same as any act of witnessing. Some things, once known, cannot be unknown. Toward the end of the interview I had with Celedonio in 2000, I wanted to clarify whether he perceived the energy he felt from the pujido as a “possession,” something foreign to him, or as an amplification of an internal energy. He responded with a lyrical caution:

He that doesn’t really know what the Devil costume on a person is, shouldn’t put it on. It’s not anything miraculous because it has something that you can’t see, but when you do the movements [. . .] You fly without wings [. . .] You start jumping, like in the sea, like when the waves from the sea are coming in, like that. It comes from inside you. You don’t know what you’re doing. The people see, the people see you. You don’t know what you’re doing. You are like, what’s the word, like a bird. You do the steps as if you were a bird that was flying like that.

Like the ritual specialists and elders within the Congo tradition, Sandra Eleta has seen more of a split with traditional ways and in the enactment of the Devil role since the coming of the road and greater global connectivity. Having witnessed the end of the era of practicing the Congo tradition within a closed community and the passing away of those practitioners whose everyday life identities were more intimately tied to their Congo personas, she
made the following observation toward the conclusion of our 2004 interview: “There was no ‘role,’ no performance of a ‘role’ before. It was only one thing—a person was involved existentially in what he was doing. Now, there is a separation. There is a character. It’s performance. But before, there was something together. So, it’s like, you know, the end of the magicians.” Interpreted within the language of performance, Ileana Solís articulated it this way:

Well, when you construct a character, at least in theater, one of the basic things is the breath of the character. Breath is the life of the character. [. . .] I believe it’s the most important thing as a creator of characters. [. . .] that energy that comes from inside out and returns back inside, that cycle. Not just anybody can do that, right? And, well, [Celedonio] had that. He had the breath of, the breath of the Devil. [. . .] You don’t need a great big mask to be a demon, a Devil, right? With just some cardboard you can transform, transform the vision of the spectator to something deeper.

At the time of his death in 2005 at the age of 87, Celedonio Molinar Ávila was undeniably the most respected and influential Diablo Mayor on the Atlantic Coast of Panama. His method of Devil embodiment was sociocultural critique as much as it was ritual performance and play. His popularity, longevity, and legendary Major Devil embodiment are key factors in the cultural currency of the Congo and Devil traditions of Portobelo, Panama, and their status as “traditional” and “authentic.” “The whole world respected him,” Carlos said in our 2013 interview. “His legacy was to keep up the Devil tradition,” Carlos continued, but it was also more than that:

As a citizen of the village, he was a marvelous person. What is more, he was a deacon in the Catholic Church and worked with the Boy Scouts. He was always trying to instill it in the kids. On Sundays you could always find him at the church as a deacon, and outside of that he was a person always on the move. You never saw him sitting around. He was always active. He was a very admired person in the village. He was respectful and was always respected by the people. They took care of him. They respected him. We, the Devils during that time, all knew who he was. So we would all give him respect whenever we would see him coming. He always said to me, “Carlos, when you play Devil, as I’ve told you, do not waiver. Enjoy it. Play with it. Look and see what you are doing.” That is what I do. I enjoy it. I live it. I play with it. That is what I always try to do [so] that [we] maintain [our] traditions.
Cultural innovations must be adopted by community stakeholders in order to survive the passing of their catalysts. Viudo Ceballos succeeded in introducing the Devil character into the Congo tradition of Nombre de Dios and organizing it into a unique cultural tradition that not only persisted there but also migrated back to his place of birth on Celedonio’s body and in his consciousness. Likewise, Celedonio not only introduced the Major Devil character as well as the tradition of blessing the Devil to Portobelo, but also saw it so accepted within the local culture that its practice successfully passed to other practitioners and its influence became amplified through the Festival of the Devils and Congos, which has the cultural preservation of the Congo/Devil game at its core. Every two years, Devils within the Congo tradition and their communities pack their local performance practices on their bodies and travel with them to Portobelo, which has become a gathering space for the Panamanian Congo Carnival diaspora. The festival provides discrete Congo communities an opportunity to check, critique, and share their cultural orientation to Congo/Devil culture within a broader community before completing their circum-local journeys back home with performative potentials influenced by their encounters. Celedonio, therefore, got to witness his innovations take root and bear fruit before his passing. “That’s what I’ve always wished for,” Celedonio said toward the end of our 2000 interview, “that they [the Devils] do the steps well. The people come to enjoy themselves with what the Devil’s doing, how the Devil plays with the Congos. It’s lovely. And it came to me, it came to me [. . .] the resolution that this doesn’t end, that the tradition doesn’t end.”