When the Devil Knocks
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Figure 5.1 Carnival "Diablito" (Photo by Elaine Eversley)
In the winter of 2001, I staged my first work of critical/performance ethnography based on my initial research with the Congo community of Portobelo, Panama. Having read dissertations by Ronald Smith (1976) and Patricia Drolet (1980), shared email and telephone conversations with the scholar-artist Arturo Lindsay for over a year, and conducted initial interviews with key practitioners regarding the Congo tradition in Panama, I found myself adrift in competing currents surrounding its ritual form. What I had read, heard, and sensed was not lining up properly, partially because I had not yet witnessed the tradition for myself. I had seen video footage of previous Carnivals and “packaged” tourist presentations, but I had not yet experienced it during Carnival season. Attempting to gain clarity through written work alone fell short of my needs. My strongest lessons about the tradition in Panama had come through my body. I had listened to the drums, watched the women dance, and mimicked their movements. The women would clap their hands and shake their heads when I got it right, or put their hands on my hips to teach me how to move them when I got it wrong. During my first trip, most of my conversations had to be filtered through a translator because I spoke very little Spanish. The only time there was no filtering was when I danced. Congo practitioners and I communicated directly, body to body. Men and
boys would dance with me gently to lull me into comfort and then overpower me with more complicated movements. They would laugh and the women would furrow their eyebrows, raise their voices, shout things I did not understand at the men, push me back into the circle, and encourage me to stand my ground and do it again. When I overpowered the men, the women would roar with claps and laughter. I understood their tones, facial expressions, the tug of a hand on my arm, the comfort of another patting my back, and the affirmation of head-shakes and winks.

After one of these events, Arturo told me that Marta, a Congo ritual specialist who later gave me the Congo name “Mariposa” (“Butterfly”), had teased, “Are you sure she isn’t Portobeleña?” My body understood things that my speaking/hearing, writing/reading self could not yet know. Scripting and staging a solo performance allowed me to wrestle with these issues. I created the script and put it on my body—not to tidy up the slippages, but to get inside and better understand them. Not only did I use performance “as a complement, alternative, supplement, and critique of inscribed texts” (Conquergood 1991, 191), but also scripting the performance offered me an alternative textual mode through which to analyze it. This chapter examines the contributions that the process of creating and publicly staging four of these critically engaged performances made to this study and to my understanding of the complexity of Congo traditions.

La historia de los congos de Portobelo: Translating History Through the Body

La historia de los congos de Portobelo: Translating History Through the Body was a forty-minute solo performance staged in the Mussetter-Struble Theatre in the Theatre and Interpretation Center (TIC) at Northwestern University. As I stated in the program notes, the performance was “part of an on-going conversation between my African-American southern female body, the Congo dance tradition, and those who view both.” During my first visit to Portobelo, I met with representatives of several prominent Congo families: Melba Esquina and Delia Barrera Clifundo, two former Congo Queens; Virgilio “Yaneca” Esquina and Ariel “Pajarito” Jiménez, two Congo practitioners and founding members of Taller Portobelo, the workshop of the Congo artists; one of the three contemporary Major Devils, Carlos Chavarría; and Simona Esquina, one of the current Cantalantes (primary singers).

In creating La historia de los congos, I sought an opportunity to better understand the tradition through an embodied exploration of its central
characters and metaphoric use of crossings and crosses. I staged the performance in six sections: two to introduce the audience to the material and four to delve into each of the primary Congo characters (Devil, Queen, King, and Pajarito). Wearing a loose-fitting, hibiscus-colored A-line dress with a brightly painted wind instrument dangling from my neck, and ankle bells, I stepped my bare feet onto a stage populated by two props: a six-foot wooden frame in the shape of a Christian cross, which I had painted in the pointillist style for which Congo art is known, and a plastic dressmaker’s form cloaked under a veil of black fabric. The cross lay center-stage, stuffed with red, orange, and yellow confetti and rose petals. Hidden beneath the colorful fluff were leg irons and wrist shackles. Upstage left, the plastic dressmaker’s form stood clothed as a Congo woman beneath black fabric. I entered from the center aisle of the audience and approached the stage, the symbolic “location” I had created for the tradition, performing two original “first impression” poems. The first painted Portobelo as “exotic” to me; the second rendered me as “exotic” to Portobelo. I also used these poems and the reflexive opportunity they engendered to reflect on my initial ethnographic presence in Portobelo, when I was still very much learning what and how to “do” and “be.”

During my early experiences in Portobelo, I crisscrossed the town several times each day with a clumsy video recorder, a tape recorder, a notebook, Spanish dictionary, and two other U.S. students as awkward as I was. One was a film student; the other was a dancer. Not yet trusting each other to share, we carried three of everything. Not wanting to admit that we did not know exactly what we were doing, we overdid everything. Thankfully, Portobeleños were extremely patient with us. Arturo Lindsay, who was well known in the community, had introduced us, and we looked even younger than we were, which won us extra patience. For the most part, people seemed intrigued by how interested three young Black women from the United States were in their tradition. We also amused them. Most days we were slightly more entertaining than some of the local eccentrics because we were new and our quirks were still revealing themselves. Looking back now, I see clearly the spectacle we were—and smell it too (we traveled everywhere thickly perfumed with Deep Woods Off). Ironically, when I tried to be less conspicuous during later trips, my lack of equipment was often a cause of disappointment. “Oh,” a Congo member told me, “you didn’t bring your recorder. You don’t want to tape me like you did Simona?” Even when I just intended casual visits with Congo friends during my research year, people often interrupted their own stories to say “This is important; you might want to go get your recorder.”

After performing the first two introductory sections of *La historia de los congos*, I entered the stage, which was separated into quadrants by the cross.
As I approached, two coperformers came on stage, grabbed the cross by its shorter arms, and hung it from hooks at the back of the space, leaving in place the rose petals and confetti. The cross became the backdrop for the remaining performance, and its colorful innards became a crossroads. I explored each character in the physical space of a quadrant. I started with the Devil upstage left, stepped upstage right over the imaginary dividing line and transitioned into the Queen, traversed “the line” again by stepping forward to explore the King, and crossed “the line” a final time to analyze Pajarito. This physical embodiment allowed me to explore the characters not only through their histories but also through the variations in the way they move. As I told the story of each character, I simultaneously story-talked the ritual drama of the Congo tradition as it is enacted during Carnival season.

In keeping with the movement vocabulary of the Devil character, I bent low, jumped high, keeping the heel of one foot perpendicular to the arch of the other, and kept my arms spread wide in the quadrant dedicated to “Devil.” My red dress was meant to signify his red costume. The jingles punctuating my steps represented the thick cuff of bells that the Devil characters wear around their ankles to alert the Congos of their proximity. As Devil, my movements were choppy, decisive, and quick.

My movements softened and became fluid as “Queen.” In the Congo tradition, she is the seat of power that the Devil attempts to capture. Because the only elements that distinguish the Queen's costume from that of other female Congo characters are her crown and large wooden cross, I used the space of her story to explore the dress and dance of Congo women as well. It was important to me to stress my movements as metonymic rather than metaphoric, especially because I had not had enough experience with the movements to translate them confidently onto my body. Also, I wanted to keep my “Black” identity and Congo “Black” identity in productive tension. I approached the black-covered dressmaker’s form with the same sense of curiosity with which I continually press my Blackness up against Congo Blackness. After taking a few beats to explore the material and its girth, I unveiled the form to reveal a torso of my size and shape but dressed very differently than I was. As I pressed my body into the back of the model, grabbing up the sides of the pollera in which it was dressed, the audience witnessed my head, arms, and feet animating the wide Congo skirt through story and dance.

As I had done in the space of “Queen,” I used the King's quadrant to explore his identity as well as other Congo male identities. Like the Queen, the King is distinguished from other Congo males by his crown. Because the male Congo stance is wide, I stood in a wide warrior pose to introduce the King, whose primary role is as a strategist who sends other Congos to dis-
tract the Devil in order to protect the Queen. Of all the primary characters, the King's contemporary role is least active. It is the only primary role often played in Portobelo by teen and preteen boys.

My last crossing was into the space of Pajarito, the son of the King and Queen and an interlocutor between Congos and the Devil. Pajarito always carries a whistle to alert the Congos of the Devil's approach and a black and white flag symbolizing the peace struck between the Congos and their former enslavers. Like those of the Devil, his movements are quick, but he dances like other Congos. Thus, I placed Pajarito and the Devil stage right in red light; the King and Queen, stage left in blue.

Coming full circle, my last gesture in the performance was to interrogate my space as researcher at the end of this first encounter with Portobelo just as I had done at the beginning. While I began the performance with my reflexive space neatly off the stage, I now sat onstage, facing the audience and straddling the base of the cross. Digging beneath the beautiful roses and festive confetti, I shared with the audience the warning that Yaneca Esquina had given me. He had told me that not everyone may mean me well, that I should be very careful not to leave my food or drink unattended, and that I should wear some form of clothing inside out, even in the shower, for protection. He shared this with me and the other two young scholars who were with me after one of our interviews with him. Walking home from the interview, we teased each other in private, letting quiet laughter smother our undeniable trepidation. Later that night, though, questions and uncertainty energized the air around us; sleep would not come. Then, in the darkened room we shared, one by one we lifted our bottoms beneath the mosquito nets that helped inoculate us against one danger and quietly turned our night shorts inside out to help protect us from another. We never talked about it. Through our nonverbal act of compliance, we had acknowledged the boundaries of our existential commitment. After we did so, we calmed; we quieted; we slept. Some curiosities were beyond the thresholds we cared to cross even if all that lay beyond them were open rooms or other thresholds.

In recounting this story onstage, I searched through the rose pedals and confetti to unearth shackles and placed them on my wrists. Then, I spoke the Lord's Prayer in Spanish and English while still straddling the cross/crossroads. The critique at the heart of the Congo tradition is the way Christian ideology was wielded by the Catholic Church and Spanish Crown to promote and protect the institution of slavery. Yet, many contemporary Congo practitioners are Catholic. Celedonio, we may recall, was Major Devil in the Congo tradition and a deacon in the Catholic Church. The Congo tradition's decolonial stance embodies an insider–outsider as well as an inside-out relationship
not only to its Spanish colonial history but also to aspects of contemporary Panamanian historical narratives and Catholic religious praxis. The tradition exceeds the boundaries of folklore in its persistent acts of “doing,” “making,” and “becoming.”

As the lights dimmed, I spoke the final lines of the performance: “I returned ‘home’ with the embodied knowledge that, for better and for worse, this research would, as engaged ethnographic practice must, put my body, my understandings of myself, and my understandings of the world on the line.” Creating and staging La historia de los congos de Portobelo: Translating History Through the Body made me more conscious of the ways in which my Catholic school education and Protestant Christian upbringing helped to guide my attention and influence the socio-ethical-critical lens through which I engaged my research. My choice to engage in the research through embodied praxis also had the potential of unhinging some of the surety of these epistemologies and challenging me to “know” otherwise.

**Making the Sign of the Cross**

*Making the Sign of the Cross* (2001b) was a performance installation that gave me more questions to pack in my luggage for subsequent visits to Portobelo and to stuff in my backpack to take to the archives. The ones that captured my most immediate attention were those regarding the political economy of crosses in Panama. A strip of land parceling the Pacific from the Atlantic, Panama has a geopolitical history defined by its position as a crossroad. It is, as the title of Canal historian David McCullough’s (1977) monograph makes explicit, “The Path between the Seas.” For the first three centuries after colonization, the Spanish used it as a bridge to transport gold from Peru (in the Pacific) to Spain (in the Atlantic) via the Río Chargres (Chargres River) and the Camino Real (the Royal Road). By partnering with English pirates and privateers to cripple the Spanish enterprise, the Cimarrones used the Camino Real to help transition themselves from criminalized runaway slaves to freed persons. By the middle of the seventeenth century, Portobelo was the crossroads of the colonial Caribbean world, as traders descended on it each year for up to sixty days to buy and sell merchandise from Peru and South America in the famous Ferias de Portobelo (Portobelo Fairs). By the nineteenth century, the Panama Railroad traced the path of the Camino Real, transporting gold-rush traffic from the eastern United States and Europe to California. Created at the dawn of the twentieth century, the Panama Canal eliminated the need to round the tip of South America in order to pass from one ocean into the
other. In addition to these geographic and economic incarnations of crosses and crossroads, the Congo tradition incorporates Christian representations of crosses as well as those apparent throughout the Kongo-Atlantic world. I created *Making the Sign of the Cross* as a performance installation project and altar, as a crossroads of these various, often overlapping meanings. Further, I used the project to pay homage to the youngest African-descended victims who died while their parents were enslaved, as their parents were running for freedom, and while their parents struggled for survival as Cimarrones.

I debuted the work as my final project in Dwight Conquergood’s Field Methods course in the spring of 2002. The landscape of the piece consisted of two seven-by-three-foot strips of cloth placed on the ground to resemble an “X.” Lit tea candles and an illuminated string of white Christmas lights traced the cross. At the start of the performance, three performers, including myself, stood at three of the four endpoints of the cross holding black lanterns. The only light in the room came from the candles, Christmas lights, and lanterns. Small hand-crocheted baby shoes, bibs, and glass bottles formed an altar of absence at the fourth point of the cross. Alongside the bottles were copies of the Lord’s Prayer in Spanish and the first prayer learned by most English-speaking Christian children in the United States:

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Now I lay me down to sleep,
I pray the Lord my soul to keep,
If I shall die before I wake,
I pray the Lord my soul to take.
Amen.
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Opened to Genesis 9:25, a King James Bible presided over the area directly across from the altar at the opposite endpoint behind one of the performers. In front of the Bible and performer, two parallel dark-brown footprints were imprinted on the fabric, on top of which lay ankle irons reminiscent of the shackles likely used on enslaved Africans. The shackles were open and ajar, as if the feet had broken free. Snaking from the prints toward the altar was an orange leather whip. Two more thick brown footprints led away from the originals as if running in a wide stride. As the prints neared the little altar, they became fainter until they ended in a final footprint followed by the blunt print of a knee and two heavy handprints. I had achieved the effect days earlier, standing on the cloth in my living room in brown body-paint before running and falling on the other side. Like the Congo tradition, I wanted to draw attention not only to those who had survived to tell the story but also to those who had fallen along the way.
Framed by the Catholic prayer invocation and practice of crossing oneself, the performance was separated into four parts. The section names corresponded to the words of the invocation and were therefore entitled “In the Name of the Father,” “The Son (Sun),” “And the Holy,” “Spirit.” Sections one and three examined two of the spiritual worldviews reflected in the Congo tradition. The first, “In the Name of the Father: The Kongo Cosmogram,” looked at the use of crosses in pre-Christian Kongo cosmology, while the third, “And the Holy: The Church and Slavery,” examined the “double cross” of colonial interpretations of the Bible, which justified the exploitation of Africans through the curse of Noah’s son, Ham. It further examined the role of the Christian Church and the Spanish Crown in authorizing the transatlantic slave trade. The second section, “The Son (Sun): Panama is a Crossroads,” explored the physical location of the country in relationship to geopolitics and economics. The last part, “Spirit: Meditation for Those Left and Lost,” was a homage to the young spirits who embodied the defiance of cimarronaje even though their bodies were enslaved.

Performers One and Two stood facing one another on the unmarked strip of cloth, while Performer Three stood between the Bible and painted footprints on the marked/altar cloth. Slowly speaking her “In the Name of the Father” script, Performer One walked meditatively toward Performer Two and reached her by the end of the first portion of her script. Speaking “The Son (Sun)” portion of the script, Performer Two slowly walked toward the position that Performer One had vacated on the other side. Then the three performers spoke in unison, “Panama is a crossroads.” Performer Three turned to face the Bible behind her, knelt, and read the passage commonly cited as “The Curse of Ham” or “The Curse of Canaan.” Afterward, she arose, began her slow walk across the cloth, and delivered her portion of the script, “And the Holy: The Church and Slavery.” Once to the other side, she knelt before the altar in silence. Three beats later, the other two performers left their positions on the endpoints to join her. After Performer Three spoke a meditation, the three bowed, remained silent for another few beats, returned to their starting positions on the cross, placed their lanterns in front of them, and exited the performance space. Members of the audience, who had been standing around the cross, were then invited to explore the installation at their own pace and in their own time.

During the final days of my second three-week visit to Portobelo in May 2002, I restaged Making the Sign of the Cross in the middle of the street in front of Taller Portobelo, the Congo workshop. I replaced the Christmas lights with an entire border of tea lights, eliminated the Bible, and re-envisioned the altar. Because I had decided to stage the performance outside, the
Christmas lights were impractical. I adjusted the script to critique the church by connecting the whip of slavery to the Devil’s use of whips in Congo performance. Because Congo Devils parody brutal enslavers, who often appropriated the Christian devil trope to help maintain power over their enslaved populations, the transition was an organic one. Finally, I spent the weeks prior to the performance creating a three-foot-tall rectangular house frame with a triangular roof that would serve as the structure for my revised altar. I painted the structure blue and dotted it with gold and bronze specks in the pointillist style of the Congo tradition. I stuffed the baby shoes with tissue and suspended them from the roof of the structure with transparent fishing line so that they appeared to float six inches above the ground. I suspended the bibs such that each of the three pairs of shoes had its own bib, as if worn by “spirit” infants. El Padre Nuestro (The Lord’s Prayer) and the prayer “Now I Lay Me Down to Sleep” were painted on a canvas suspended from the back wall of the structure. The glass baby bottles and plastic nipples littered the building’s floor.

I staged the performance on June 6, 2001, several days before the end of that year’s Spelman College Summer Art Colony. I had invited members of the Congo community and the community at large and was nervously excited to share this piece with them. While setting up, I noticed my neighbors placing folding chairs outside their house; I felt flattered. Later, two male members of the household, Juan and his nephew, moved the television from the living room to the top of the concrete terrace railing facing out toward the street and chairs. Strange, I thought. Several of the Congo painters and Art Colony participants helped me to set up my materials and light the candles. Two colony participants performed the piece with me, and Arturo simultaneously translated the performance, line by line, into Spanish. The wind was high that evening and extinguished most of the candles before we started. It was not a good sign. By the time we began, the row of chairs outside my neighbor’s house was full, with more neighbors forming uneven rows behind them, all fixed on the television. I had not realized that my performance coincided precisely with the start of the NBA Championship game pitting Shaquille O’Neal of the Los Angeles Lakers against Allen Iverson of the Philadelphia 76ers. Amid live cheers and televised commentary, the performance went on. Later, I would be grateful that friends and spectators from next door peeked in at the start of the performance and during the commercials. A crowd of about ten people had come primarily for the performance, although many often visited with other game-watchers.

The performance ended and several people lingered to inspect the space. With Lindsay’s help, I invited anyone interested to join me inside the Taller to
talk about the piece. Only my friends from the Taller came. When they looked at me encouragingly but did not offer questions or comments, Lindsay helped me to explain some of my intentions in the piece. Afterward, several friends offered encouraging comments, but then, more silence. I thanked them and suggested we go watch the game. Philadelphia beat the Lakers 107 to 101 in overtime. I am told it was a great game. I looked toward the television but was more focused on what I viewed as my failure. After cleaning up the space, I stayed a while to fellowship with my friends before retreating to my room. The performance, I thought, had failed. No one could have convinced me otherwise.

Lindsay had scheduled an exhibition for all of the Art Colony participants, including the Congo artists, several days later at a small gallery in Panama City. I altered my piece a final time to fit the exhibition space and staged it as an installation without the live performance. The gallery was in the old part of Panama City called Casco Viejo and stood beside Café de Assis, a restaurant and bar known for its support of the arts. Toward the end of the evening, one of the exhibition attendees pulled up a chair beside me in the café and, with Lindsay’s help, introduced himself. He was Raul Jiménez, el Diablo Segundo (the Secondary Devil), who was being groomed by Celedonio, el Diablo Mayor, to take his place. Raul congratulated me on the exhibition as well as on my June 6 performance and told me that some of the information I had shared about crosses in the Kongo Kingdom reminded him of things his father had told him when he was a child. He wanted to know more about my research and sources. He wanted to learn more about the Kongo cosmology and possible links with his tradition. And to think, I had not even noticed him on June 6! I shared my sources with him and promised to continue to do so. He offered me an interview the following day. My interview with Raul began at the house of the artist Sandra Eleta and ended with him walking with me to Celedonio’s house with the scene that began chapter 3. Making the Sign of the Cross not only attracted Raul’s interest, it also led to productive conversations and interviews with two generations of Congo Devils. Those encounters planted the seed for my second performance project, Dancing with the Devil at the Crossroads: La historia de los congos de Portobelo.

**Dancing with the Devil at the Crossroads:**
La historia de los congos de Portobelo

Performed in the Wallis Theatre of Northwestern University’s Theatre and Interpretation Center in February 2002, Dancing with the Devil at the Cross-
roads (2002) was a sixty-minute intertextual ensemble performance that created a dialectic between two Black Diaspora representations of “devil.” The performance created a dialogue between the multiple, sometimes competing voices of two legends rumored to have made pacts with the “devil” in order to master their crafts. The first was Celedonio, the oldest living Diablo Mayor in Portobelo, Panama, who introduced the character of Diablo Mayor to the town’s Congo performance tradition. The second was Robert Johnson, one of the most famous musicians of the U.S. Delta blues tradition. Born in 1911 and 1916 respectively, Johnson and Celedonio were contemporaries carrying out two distinct forms of Black cultural performance in rural areas of the Americas. Robert Johnson’s musical talents as a blues guitarist are legendary. So is the mythology that he sold his soul to the devil at the crossroad of Highways 49 and 61 in exchange for his talent. Placing their stories, histories, musical environments, and movement vocabularies in conversation to acquire better experiential and participatory understandings of both, the performance sought to mine similarities and differences between ideologies of “crossroads” and “devil” as they circulated in the cultural contexts of these two men.

Five members made up the cast, three women and two men. The women narrated the performance through a bifurcated choreopoem. They served as an omnipotent female trinity that bridged the spatiotemporal gaps separating Johnson, Celedonio, and the audience. The male cast members performed the roles of Celedonio and Johnson. I created the script as a work in progress, organic enough for us to workshop and mold collectively. Each of the performers was chosen not only because of his or her acting ability but also because of what his or her life experiences brought to the workshop process and the performance. Through the process of scripting and performing this piece, I wanted to get a sense of how bodies steeped in different movement/musical vocabularies interpret Congo dance. I also was fascinated by Celedonio’s passion for both his participation in the church and his role as Devil, both of which lit his eyes and animated his body in story-talking.

Two of the three women who joined me in the project were Latina; the other was African American. All had training in ballet and danced hip-hop socially; both Latina women also danced salsa socially. Tatiana relocated from Brazil to the United States as an adolescent and was trained in flamenco as well as belly dancing. Diana, who was born in Puerto Rico, had training in modern dance. Courtney, a U.S.-born African American woman, had training in jazz dance. Because of my movement background, I knew that my body had originally approached Congo performance through a mix of salsa, merengue, reggae, hip-hop, and ballet. The first four affected my hips and shoulders; the
latter was a memory my arms knew. My body encountered dancing to blues music the same year it encountered Congo. On the rare occasions I danced to blues music, I did so with male partners who led me in Chicago-style stepping, which my body registered as a hip-hop form of what my mother refers to as “hand-dancing” with merengue turns. I wanted to know how the bodies and consciousnesses of my female performers would embrace Congo and blues. Of the three, Tatiana’s dance movements most closely approached those I had seen on Congo matrons. It was not just the controlled fluidity that belly dancing brought to her hips but also the confident tenacity with which she approached the movement. She knew how to make herself big and take up space. She knew how to make her body a dare.

I chose a blues bassist to play the role of Robert Johnson and a seminary student with a passion for acting to play the role of Celedonio. The bassist, Charles, the son of a blues guitarist and younger brother of a blues drummer, had grown up with Johnson’s music and lore. William, the son of a Baptist minister who was following his own calling in the faith, played Celedonio. In one of the most powerful moments of our workshops and subsequent performances, William transgressed the space between his preacher-self and performer-self to deliver the adapted transcript of one of my interviews with Celedonio. In so doing, he released the same type of energy that I had witnessed during the original interview. As the writer-director of the piece, I had been pushing William to let the words fill up his body, to almost overflow with an excitement in what he was saying. What he ultimately delivered was akin to a southern Baptist preacher at the apex of his sermon. Standing in the middle of two of the narrators as the third knelt facing him, he started as if making a point, “It is about the PUJIDO / The pujido / From the verb pajar: To raise / To raise up.” Transitioning into an adaptation of Celedonio’s interview text, he began to shuffle his feet a bit and let the energy work up through his thighs and torso:

It is like a possession—
But it doesn’t let an outside something in,
It just amplifies what’s inside.
When you’re Diablo
Once you put the clothes on—
The Diablo costume—
What comes out
Is
Is an arrogance
That you don’t realize
The moment that you put the costume on
All that stuff comes out
All this arrogance
comes out (Alexander 2002, 21–22)

By the time he reached the second “arrogance,” William’s whole body was alive with energy. He elongated the word to make it “a-A-A-rogance” and added a syllable to “out” to make it “owe-ta.” He continued: “It’s like a possession / When it happens / I can actually fly / When it happens.” His feet were moving as though he were walking, although he stayed in the same place, and his arms shot out from his body on the word “fly” as he fluttered his hands like wings. “I know I’m the one who’s moving,” he said, calming back down a little, “I know it’s me / But I can’t explain or control it” (22).

When Celedonio spoke similar words to me in Panama in June of 2000, he transitioned from a small, delicate man taking up only part of himself to a vibrant presence that seemed to extend beyond the bounds of his own flesh. His back, which had been slightly slouched during the earlier part of the interview, woke up and became perfectly erect. His brows danced and his eyes shone. The muscles of his face tightened to push out each of his words with focus and force. He placed his hands firmly on his lap, then made big elegant gestures with them in the air as his feet tapped and danced in place. At the time, I had difficulty understanding how this man who had just come from Catholic mass could get so excited, so animated about the type of energy released in him during the Devil performance. People had told me stories in private about how Celedonio would get possessed and not be himself. You could see it in his eye, the people said. He would open a door at the crossroads and let the devil step through, they had told me. Whether or not that is true, I cannot say, just as I will never know whether Robert Johnson really made a deal with the devil at the crossroad of Highways 49 and 61. The mystical and mysterious stories surrounding him led me to filter my perception of Celedonio through a lens of wonder tinged slightly with fear. That was how I had missed in 2000 what William’s 2002 performance clarified for me—the fluidity of spirituality and art, the fluidity of identity. Participating in the Congo tradition is just as much a part of Celedonio’s identity as participating in the Catholic faith. He has done both since his youth. An elder parishioner from William’s church asked during one of the talkback sessions after a performance, “How did it feel to play the Devil, and were you afraid of what your church members might think?” William answered that it felt great, that he was an actor who loved to perform, and that his spirit had been just as active.
on the stage as it is in the pulpit. Hearing his explanation gave me a nuanced perspective through which to understand Celedonio's embodiment of Christian beliefs and ideologies as complementary rather than contradictory to his ability to embody the Congo Major Devil character.

**El museo congo**

My final staged ethnographic performance represented my first completely collaborative project with the Congo artists of Portobelo, and it reinforced some of the complex ways in which identity politics affect ethnographic research. While I have documented my other performance projects primarily through narrative analysis, I have incorporated photographs of this culminating project in this chapter because they show how members of the Congo community of Portobelo represent the most salient parts of their tradition on their own terms.

On Saturday, July 12, 2003, I co-curated and participated in *El museo congo* at San Jerónimo Fort in Portobelo. The project was a collaboration between the Taller artists Virgilio “Yaneca” Esquina, Virgilio “Tito” Esquina, Reynaldo “Rey” Esquina, Gustavo Esquina de la Espada, Ariel Jiménez, Jose “Moraitho” Angulo, Manuel “Tatu” Golden, and Jerónimo “Jero” Chiari—all of whom are active participants in the Congo performance tradition. Almost all of these artists also have at least one relative who either relocated to Portobelo from the interior during Omar Torrijos’s 1970s road construction and land reform projects or who is of West Indian descent. The other *El museo congo* artists included Hector Jiménez, an Archangel in the Congo tradition; Danilo Barrera, a local resident related to many of the Congo artists; Jenny Arribu, a visual artist from the United States who initiated a children’s art class in Portobelo; Carla Escoffery, a Panamanian visual artist who assisted with Jenny’s class; Pamela Sunstrum, a visiting Botswanan artist from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; and Michelle Lanier, an independent artist from the United States and previous participant of the Spelman Summer Art Colony.

A month in the planning, the project was initiated by a presentation of my work for the Fulbright Scholars’ conference of grantees in the Central American Region. When one of my Congo friends asked how the presentation went, I responded by offering to do the presentation in the Taller for whoever wanted to witness it. This was a spontaneous dialogical performance that I hoped would help to better explain my project to the people so intimately involved in it as well as to raise questions I might not have anticipated.
All of the artists listed above were present, except Michelle Lanier, who had not yet arrived for her third visit to Portobelo. Until the presentation, I had never really explained my rationale of performance ethnography to the group. They had witnessed me making art but had not known how I was attempting to use it. I had incorporated various photos of them into the presentation, and they responded with pride at having been included and at how seriously I was taking what they saw as my contribution to the tradition’s historical preservation. In the discussion that followed, different artists started to talk about what they might do if they were to create an installation project about their tradition. I thought that they had offered marvelous ideas and asked if they might be interested in collaborating on a performative “Congo museum” that would be based on the parts of the tradition to which each individual artist or artistic team was most attracted. They enthusiastically agreed. My brief elation quickly turned to panic when I realized that, while we had all worked on different projects with Arturo Lindsay over the years regarding various aspects of the tradition, I had never attempted to lead visual artists in such an endeavor. I have training as a performer and director, but I am primarily a self-taught installation artist. “No problem,” one of the artists, Ariel, assured me; they were all self-taught artists, too.

In addition to the installations we would create, we invited Congo elders to participate by offering a congada. When they agreed, Sandra Eleta volunteered to host a lunch at her home for all the participants and their guests. Doña Cecilia (Ceci) and Soledad, two Portobeleños who assisted Sandra with the cooking and management of her home, made fufu, a fish stew served over coconut rice with yellow plantains, Doña Ceci’s signature dish.

Roberto Enrique King, of the Asociación Cultural Alterarte in Panama City, and the U.S. Embassy helped us to publicize the event in the Panamanian press. Unfortunately, we could not have chosen a more inopportune date for our project. El museo Congo was scheduled to take place just hours after Hurricane Claudette entered the coast as a strong tropical storm, flooding some chambers of the fort, creating a muddy mess in others, and providing us all with what Sandra would later call “a good test of character.” By the 2:00 p.m. opening time, the weather had not yet allowed us to complete our setup. To improvise, Sandra invited all of the loyal enthusiasts who had come to experience our “museo” into her home for lunch. When the rain stopped and the floodwaters receded, we began. Because Sandra’s land was less muddy than the fort, we relocated the congada to there and saved it as a finale. Although we had not intended it as such, our on-the-ground maneuvering and tactical “making do” created its own performative installations of the Congo tradition.
The events surrounding the creation and exhibition of Pamela Sunstrum’s installation “I’ll Fly Away” (“Volaré”) gave us the conditions for our first productive meta-performance. Inspired by a similar ritual that Sandra and several students from the first Spelman Art Colony had initiated, Pamela decided to create a healing ritual and altar space in the area in the back of the fort where enslaved people are believed to have been held. The official purpose of the dungeon-like chamber was to hold munitions, but the stories that have passed down about it and the “feeling” one gets while in the space suggest that it also stored humans. It had the same aesthetic quality and sensual feel as similar spaces in Elmina slave castle in Ghana, West Africa, which I had experienced years prior. It was a dank, square space with one door, no window, and a small square space in the ceiling for air. At Pamela’s request, Ariel collected white chicken feathers for her, which she planned to hang, one by one, from the ceiling opening by a thin white string. Inspired by the Congos’ use of broken mirrors on their hats and in their artwork, she attached a small piece of glass to each feather in order to capture and reflect light. The effect would be that of a ghostly chandelier. She also planned to place dozens of candles in a flowering pinwheel design and to light them for the opening.

On July 11, the day before El museo congo was to be held, Sandra enlisted the help of one of the local gravediggers to clean out the fort’s holding area, which was located down a flight of stone stairs at the far end of the rectangular building. The interior space was less than 800 square feet and had a dirt floor. Before the gravedigger’s intervention, the smell of urine, excrement, and rot made it difficult to enter. Afterward, it smelled mostly of damp earth and the bleach he had used on the walls, and Pamela placed the candles and feathers in the room in preparation for the following day’s event.

Now that the space had been literally cleansed, Pamela invited Carmelita and Angelica (two members of the Spanish Heritage Group), Sandra, Doña Ceci, Soledad, Jenny, and me to join her in a ritual spiritual cleansing, which we would invent according to whatever we felt we could offer to the space. Sandra had given us several bottles of Agua de Florida, a sweet-smelling, inexpensive perfume water, to carry with us, and I offered us each a stick of jasmine incense. As we stood in the space sharing silence, some meditating, others praying, still others patiently observing, we poured our Agua de Florida as a libation to the ancestors, and Pamela invited us to speak aloud anything we wished to share. The memory that remains most distinct for me is when Doña Ceci closed her eyes and began to sing a sweet, melancholy song. I was too overwhelmed to tune my ears to the Spanish lyrics, but the emotion in her voice made me cry. When I wiped my eyes, I noticed that many of us
were crying and had reached out to touch each other’s hands for comfort. It was the first of several moments of communitas that the experience would yield for us. In that instance, class, nationality, and age faded into something more ephemeral and tender. A full moon had lit the sky by the time we exited. Wanting a normative communitas to sustain our spontaneous one (Turner 1982, 47), we walked away in groups of two or three locked at the elbow. By the time we reached the house, the moment had already passed. Doña Ceci and Soledad went back to work in the kitchen and teased the rest of us as “brujas” (“witches”) when we decided to take the motorboat across the bay to end our cleansing ritual with a late-night swim.

On the day of the exhibition/performance, we were all devastated to learn that someone had stolen Pamela’s candles and destroyed her feathers during the night. At the time, we were unsure whether this was in response to a perceived act of “brujería” (“witchcraft”) or whether it was meanness, mischievous thievery, thievery for necessity, or something more random. Regardless, we were all deeply hurt. This was our second experience of communitas. The Congo artists were even more concerned because they did not want this to be the memory that Pamela would pack with her later that day to take back to the States. As we waited for the rain to subside that morning, we worked frantically to rebuild Pamela’s piece. Because we wanted a better ending for our story than the one the hurricane and vandalism were offering us, we all decided to sacrifice elements of our individual pieces to ensure her project’s success. Pamela’s project became ours, too. Arial collected more feathers; Sandra purchased candles in small glass vases, the type sold outside the church to be lit for ancestors and blessings, to replace the long thin candles that had been stolen; Rey, Gustavo, and I offered the one hundred sticks of jasmine incense we had amassed for our project; Michelle offered a string of Tibetan prayer beads and three bowls; Danilo collected flowers; and Pamela worked to reassemble one of the most powerful pieces of our collaborative project. It was powerful not only because of its artistic value, but also because it initiated another moment of communitas that pulled us out of the slump and worry the weather had created and gave us even more incentive to rise above it.

On each of the stairs leading down to her space, Pamela placed small clay vessels created on top of plastic bottle caps. Each vessel contained Agua de Florida. At Michelle’s suggestion, Pamela placed eggs, sugar, and flour in separate bowls to help nourish the ancestors’ spirits. Once lit, the incense and candles gave the space a sacred, ghostly feel.

Having learned the art of Devil mask-making from Jerónimo and Raul, Jenny decided to work with several local young children on an installation
entitled “Caras de Portobelo: Un taller de mascaras” (“Faces of Portobelo: A Mask Workshop”). All of the participants were siblings, children, or extended family members of the participating Congo artists. The mask-making process, which lasted several weeks, involved excavating clay from the jungle, using it to create a mold, drying the mold in the sun, applying a layer of papier-mâché, and allowing it to thoroughly dry before adding a new layer. Jenny charged each of the children with creating any type of mask they chose as long as it
represented some aspect of the tradition. At the end of the process, each child painted his or her own mask. The children created masks of the Congo Queen as well as of the Devil. On the day of the “museo,” Jenny and Carla installed the masks one by one in small window slits along the back wall of the fort. Figures 5.4–5.8 are photographs of five of the thirteen masks they helped the children make. One child, my little friend Sarabi, could not decide whether to make a Devil or a Queen, so she made a Devil Queen.
Figure 5.4  Brown Congo Queen with blond rope hair and painted blue eyes (Photo by Renée A. Craft)

Figure 5.5  Brown Congo Queen with mirror fragments in her crown (Photo by Renée A. Craft)
Figure 5.6 Blue Devil Queen with pink lips and green eyebrows (Photo by Renée A. Craft)

Figure 5.7 Red and black Devil mask with toothpick teeth (Photo by Renée A. Craft)
Congo artists Ariel and Tatu restaged an installation project that they had originally presented as a part of Ferias de Portobelo 2003, which consisted of bilingual and bicultural poetry and an exhibition of biodegradable earthworks, installations, and sculptures. As a memorial to the Cimarrons, they created “El espíritu de los ancestros de los congós” (“The Spirit of the Congo Ancestors”). Their installation consisted of a chalked path bordered by string leading up to a Congo jacket, which was covered with bones and small bags to which they had attached feathers. The jacket was held in place by a pole with a crossbar. The bones and feathers symbolized the kinds of talismans the Cimarrones might have carried with them into the jungles. Additionally, Ariel and Tatu hung a Congo hat between two hand-carved and painted bastones (walking sticks) on the wall behind the jacket.

Located in one of the fort’s front corners, Moraitho and Hector’s installation was a tribute to Taller Portobelo’s role in preserving the tradition by
displaying several of Moraitho’s paintings alongside Congo male, female, and Archangel costumes. Their piece demonstrated the ways in which the new practice of Congo visual art not only serves as a method to reflect and preserve the Congo tradition, but also serves as a method to extend the tradition into other forms of creative expression. Economically, Moraitho also reasoned that some of the people coming to see our installation might also buy his art.
Figure 5.10 Close-up of Congo hat hung on fort wall (Photo by Renée A. Craft)

Figure 5.11 Close-up of Congo jacket with amulets and talismans (Photo by Renée A. Craft)
Figure 5.12 Moraitho and Hector’s “Untitled” installation (Photo by Renée A. Craft)

Figure 5.13 Close-up of Moraitho’s artwork (Photo by Renée A. Craft)
Jerónimo and Tito created an altar to the Devils of the Congo tradition using Jerónimo’s Devil costume and incorporating decorative elements from El Festival de los Diablos y Congos, including red and black painted cattle skulls adorned with ribbons and large cardboard embellishments covered with broken mirrors. Like Moraittho, they recycled parts of a burgeoning tradition, in this case El Festival de los Diablos y Congos, into the space of an older one. Like Arial and Tatu, Jero and Tito created a path leading up to their altar space. Their walkway was marked by stones, torches, and gravel. Above the costume, they suspended Jero’s elaborate Devil mask. Below the costume were his ankle bells, whip, and shoes. They chose to place their altar in a chamber that had a hole in the side wall they shared with Arial and Tatu’s installation, allowing anyone in the Devil space to “spy” on the Congos.

Recycling the mirrored base of an installation that Lindsay had created for “Ferias de Portobelo 2003,” Yaneca created a monument to El Pajarito. Appropriately, he chose a space between the Devil chamber and the Congo space for his project. Starting with a T-shaped tree branch, he soaked pieces of canvas in gesso and wrapped them in layers around the branch, following its natural contours. As in the papier-mâché mask-making process, Yaneca allowed each layer to dry little by little over time before proceeding with the next. After he had finished “the body,” he adorned it with ribbons. He carved Pajarito’s face from a coconut shell and painted it. Using cardboard and broken mirrors, he created the sculpture’s crown.

Rey, Gustavo, and I created an installation entitled “El monumento de homenaje a los espíritus de los congos” (“A Monument of Homage to the Congo Spirits”). Using cardboard and mirrors, we created thirteen pairs of footprints—four pairs of male prints and nine pairs of female prints. The male footprints represented three drummers and one male dancer. The nine female prints represented a seven-member chorus, one revellín, and a female dance partner for one set of male Congo prints. Before the rain flooded our original space, we had intended to place three Congo drums behind the drummer prints. After the rain, however, we eliminated the drums because we did not want to damage them. Suspended from transparent fishing line were a Congo pollera and Congo trousers turned inside out. We used the wire to give the clothing the feeling of floating/dancing. The ghostly pair swayed back and forth as the breeze animated them. A sombrero hung as though atop a Congo male’s head, and a Congo Queen’s crown kept watch from the open window. We had created both the sombrero and the crown especially for the project. Crisscrossing the area above us were lines of rope covered with the tethered material that had decorated the palacio’s ceiling. We created a border for the space using pieces of stone that we painted with West African Adinkra...
Figure 5.14 Jerónimo and Tito’s “Untitled” Devil installation (Photo by Renée A. Craft)

Figure 5.15 Side wall of “Untitled” el Diablo installation (Photo by Renée A. Craft)
symbols. Both Rey and Gustavo use various Adinkra symbols in their visual artwork, and I use them in my poetry.

Before the storm, we had chosen a square chamber without a ceiling for our installation. The shape of the room and the absence of a ceiling would have allowed us to tie weights to the ends of our fishing wire and toss them over the walls in order to suspend the tethered cloth and clothing. Our new space did not afford us the same luxury. Between the tropical storm, having to reorganize spaces, and the theft of Pamela’s materials, I was not thinking about the preservation of the four-hundred-year-old fort when Gustavo located nails and began hanging our materials in the new space. Our project
Figure 5.17 “El monumento de homenaje a los espiritus de los congos” (Photo by Renée A. Craft)

Figure 5.18 Adinkra stone border and mirror footprints (Photo by Renée A. Craft)
was not intended to create controversy, but it did. Hours behind schedule, we all were focused on getting the project mounted when Carmelita, one of the women from the Spanish Heritage Group, expressed her outrage. While I was trying to locate materials to help Pamela rebuild her installation and brainstorming with Rey and Gustavo to reimagine ours, Carmelita pulled me aside and chastised me for “allowing” Gustavo to “damage” the fort. With my nerves more than strained, I pulled away from her without a word, shared her concern with my collaborators, and asked what alternatives we might have. But Gustavo was furious. “Dañe el fuerte [Damage the fort]?” he wondered aloud. “Su nuestro hacer con lo que queremos [It’s ours to do with what we want]!” Gustavo reminded me that the Spanish Heritage Group had not complained when artists from Panama City had put the same kinds of nails in the fort during the Festival de los Diablos y Congo, which it had co-sponsored. At that, he continued hanging our piece, and I went to deal with other issues. The truth of the matter was that, although I had understood Carmelita’s point, I agreed with Gustavo. When she returned to see that I had not “made” Gustavo stop nailing, she stormed away.

Later that evening, Carmelita referred to me as “an imperialist American who thinks she can do whatever she pleases” and chastised the Taller artists for their lack of concern for their cultural heritage. Gustavo asked why he should revere something that was used against his ancestors and why he should have to attend to the concerns of an extranjero (foreigner) like her from Spain. This was our final moment of communitas that caused us to coalesce in camps around different feelings of rage and entitlement. The Congo artists felt the fort was theirs to use; the Spanish Heritage Group felt it was theirs to protect. The brief feeling of fluid connectedness that Carmelita and I had shared the day before had evaporated. The nails in the fort did not cause the fissures; they simply aggravated them. For months, Carmelita had been frustrated by what she perceived as Portobeleños’ lack of investment in their community as made evident to her in their disinterest in participating in cultural heritage, health and wellness, and community beautification projects initiated by her organization. For example, one project was a plan to purify the town’s drinking water. The aqueducts that supplied the town’s water were contaminated by dead frogs and in a state of disrepair. If the community would agree to pay for water treatment, the problem could be solved, but many people refused to pay. Carmelita read their refusal as apathy in improving their quality of life; I had a different understanding. In informal conversations with townspeople, I learned that they had never paid for water and the thought of doing so was completely outside of their experience. As it stood, the water sometimes made someone sick but not horribly so, and inexpensive medicine was available
when it did. Also, there was no infrastructure that would be able to enforce payment if the aqueducts were cleaned, thus, no way to ensure that those who paid would have any privileges separate from those who did not pay. So, those who could afford to do so solved the problem by installing tanks on their roofs or using other methods of filtration. Carmelita thought the majority of townspeople were being unreasonable, but many townspeople thought the Spanish Heritage Group’s plan was untenable.

Carmelita’s reaction to me was also fueled by her anger over what she saw as the U.S. government’s arrogance in going to war against Iraq. She “read” me within the frame of my nationality. To Carmelita, a woman of Spanish heritage and an employee of a Spanish cultural preservation group, I represented a selfish U.S. agent more interested in completing my own project than protecting the cultural heritage in the region. However, while she interpreted my resistance as arrogance based on nationality, I interpreted her insistence as arrogance based on race. When she insisted twice that I “make” Gustavo stop nailing, I did not hear her as the director of a project receiving a grievance from a fellow preservationist; I remain unsure that her intentions were that transparent. Rather, from my perspective, a foreign White woman was asking me, a foreign Black woman, to tell a local Black man what he could and could not do in his own hometown. She had known Gustavo as long as I had, and had come into the Taller numerous times to ask a favor, share a grievance, and lend a helping hand, yet she had approached me twice and ordered me to make him stop. Sandra offered the last words I remember on the subject: “There they go. It’s like the Cimarrones and the españoles all over again!”

In an essay published in Performance Research (Alexander Craft et al. 2007), I shared an analysis on this event with reference to the types of useful opportunities performance ethnography offers, even in the midst of misunderstandings and missteps. It bears repeating here:

In London, at the 2006 Performance Studies international conference, [three colleagues] and I relished riding the tube. With child-like glee, we anticipated the recorded female voice warning, “Mind the Gap” as the train doors yawned in sync. The caution meant that one should be careful of the space between the more stable platform and the moving cultural conduit that imbues it with meaning. From my first visit to Portobelo, Panamá in 2000, performance ethnography as a mode of critical ethnographic research has served as that type of productive warning in the dangerous hollows between what the community says, what I hear, and vice versa. Through its reliance on dialogism, performance ethnography serves as a steady reminder of the gap and a method to traverse it. It calls us to engage
its presence not as a wound to be healed or hole to be filled but rather a critical contour of discontinuity between the researcher and the communities within which she works. (70)

Performance ethnography has the potential to open a space for dialogues around race, gender, ethnicity, class, and nation that may unveil the ideological investments of the ethnographer no less than those of the communities with which s/he works. According to Conquergood (1985a), dialogical performances “bring self and Other together so that they can question, debate, and challenge one another” (9). As a mode of critical analysis, it serves as both an engaged practice to increase understandings across various boundaries of “otherness” as well as a method of meta-analysis (Madison 2005, 167–68; E. Johnson 2003a, 8).

The El museo congo installation received generous positive feedback from visitors and community members. The Congo artists saw it as another act of cultural preservation. The fragments of the tradition we chose to uplift can be grouped along the three strands that I find at the core of the Congo tradition’s ability to have survived since the colonial period and to press on toward the future: 1) tradition as related to the ancestors; 2) tradition as related to contemporary practitioners and practices; and 3) tradition as transformative, able to absorb new elements without sacrificing salient older ones.

Conclusion: Toward Sankofa

The history of the Americas starts with colonization and cimarronaje. Enslaved Africans “danced with the devils” and survived, but did not win. It was a dance toward decolonization and self-determination that continues. Citizens of the Americas remain entangled in violent struggles over resources, representation, and social justice that reflect the structural asymmetrical race relations on which the countries of the Americas were founded. The concept of “Sankofa” is derived from the Akan people of Ghana, West Africa, and is represented in an Asante Adinkra symbol as a bird with an egg in its beak, looking backward. The egg is said to represent the future. The concept teaches us the necessity to “look back” or reflectively engage with the past in order to move forward. Toward that end, this section is a Sankofa, a kinesthetic conclusion to a study that reflects on its progress as it steadily marches toward new horizons.

This study has engaged questions related to contemporary Congo traditions and twentieth-century Panamanian Blackness through five princi-
ple performative “scenes”: Performance of/as Ethnoracial Identity; Cultural and Ritual Performance; Performance as/is the (Re)making of Culture; and Duality, Double-Consciousness, and the Trick of Performing for “Others.” In the first, Performance of/as Ethnoracial Identity, I analyzed the evolution of “etnia negra” racial discourses over the arc of the twentieth century to understand how an African-descended community that enacts a performative tradition steeped in the history of Black presence in Panama self-identified as Black at the beginning of the century, as Mestizo at mid-century, and as Black again at the end of the century. To understand the community’s discursive trajectory, I analyzed its twentieth-century sociopolitical history as an African-descended community that entered Panama during the colonial period as enslaved people in dialogue with West Indian communities that entered Panama during the neocolonial period as laborers on the U.S.-owned and controlled Panama Canal. Doing so illuminated how “Black” in the mid-century came to mean non-Panamanian, non-Spanish-speaking, and foreign in ways that threatened rights of citizenship and failed to allow space for hispanicized African-descended populations that had fought battles over citizenship and belonging centuries before without risking claims to their cultural and national identities. The dismantling of the Panama Canal Zone and the U.S. turnover of the Canal to Panama at the end of the twentieth century began an era in which the term Afro-Panamanian allowed Afro-Colonials and Afro-Antilleans a shared platform from which to demand acknowledgment of their differential ethnoracial histories and the value of their labor in building the current Republic.

Chapter 2 focused on Congo traditions through the lens of cultural performance and ritual performance. In part 1 of the chapter, I analyzed the productive friction between what Raymond Williams (1977) would refer to as the tradition’s “official consciousness” and “practical consciousness” to gain a better understanding of the difference between the ways practitioners explain its meaning and purpose through third-person narratives (e.g., “This is the way it is done.”) compared with the ways in which they discuss it informally and enact their contemporary participation (e.g., “This is the way we did it this year.”). As Stuart Hall (2003) would argue, idealized narratives of the traditions exist in an ahistorical bubble, whereas those situated in first-person narratives construct the tradition as “subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power” (225).

For elders and ritual specialists, the road that the government built serves as a persistent marker that shifted the centrality of Congo cultural performance and interrupted an intercommunity feature of the tradition that had been key to the Congo game—war play. Before the 1960s when the road that
connects Portobelo and other Atlantic coast communities to the broader Republic was constructed, isolated Afro-Colonial towns immersed themselves in Congo performances throughout Carnival season. “Playing Congo” meant living in communal relationship to other Congo practitioners, especially during the apex of Carnival season, without “breaking character” to do or be otherwise. The road brought greater access to resources and opportunities, but it also made practicing Congo something one might do intermittently between other forms of work or play. Without the immersive experience that facilitated the prolonged embodied transfer of cultural knowledge, some nuances were lost and others risked being flattened to spectacle. Part 2 of the chapter examined the notion of cultural change in the tradition as “new.” Through repeated interviews and reflection, I began to understand that elements of the tradition that now form its official consciousness such as the Major Devil, Angels, Priest, and the practice of blessing or baptizing the Devils are twentieth-century additions. Although the pace of globalization dramatically increased in the latter half of the twentieth century and the construction of the road created a clear point of rupture, Congo traditions in the current form are a bricolage of elements from the colonial to the present period. They are cultural performances that maintain their relevance by a contentious process of incorporation and adaptation. More than the presentation of folkloric performances that present some seemingly sealed past, Congo performances maintain their subversive ability by moving with their practitioners—by commemorating the past and actively reflecting the present.

Taking the Devil character as its central focus, chapter 3 served as a case study to explore in greater detail some of the claims made in the previous chapter. Focused on the three practitioners who have played the Major Devil role in the living memory of local practitioners, it exercised a circum-local paradigm to analyze the ways in which this twentieth-century addition was incorporated into the Congo tradition of Portobelo, Panama, such that it now serves as a pivotal part of the official narrative. The Major Devil tradition was created through micro processes of diaspora—through the migration and return of practitioners within a narrow radius with new and different ways of doing the tradition. The community’s decision to incorporate the Major Devil character and the ripples of change that this evinced, including the act of blessing the Devil and the additional characters needed to do so, involved an active embodied negotiation between the ways in which Celedonio Molinar Ávila envisioned the trajectory of his cultural intervention and the ways in which the community chose to accept it. When he served as Major Devil, Celedonio could direct the character’s purpose and embodiment based his authority as the only one in the community directly trained.
in how the character was to be performed and the most experienced in doing so. When the time for his retirement neared, the Congo Royal Court and community exerted a greater role in how they imagined the tradition continuing. Equally important, mentees like Carlos Chavarría, the current Major Devil, exercised their right to make different existential choices regarding the parts of the Devil tradition they chose to embody and the parts they chose to ignore. I ended the chapter focused on the El Festival de los Diablos y Congos, a twenty-first-century cultural intervention that reimagines and reinstates circum-local intercommunity “visits” by creating an opportunity for Major Devils and Congo communities from throughout the Republic to share aspects of their cultural performances with one another in Portobelo outside of Carnival season while opening a dedicated space for ritual specialists to mentor and educate younger practitioners. It also serves as an act of cultural preservation and promotes the relevance and importance of the Congo tradition to the broader Republic.

Chapter 4 focused on the “scene” of Duality, Double-Consciousness, and the Trick of Performing for “Others.” Portobelo and Congo traditions exist as an exotized Black cultural space and performance in the imaginaries of most external visitors. In this chapter, I analyzed the ways in which Congo consciousness about these external perceptions helps to frame tourists’ presentations of the tradition in ways that shift female practitioners’ embodiment from audacious and daring in the local space of ritual performance to restrained and pristine for tourist audiences. Congo male practitioners also alter their role to police aggressive or otherwise inappropriate tourist interaction with female practitioners more actively in tourist presentations, whereas Congo women often police such interactions in the ritual space of performance through movement vocabularies endemic to and expected of female practitioners’ performative mastery. Finally, I examined the ways in which Congo performance allows practitioners to consume their audiences for the purposes of amusement and entertainment just as their audiences actively consume them.

My method of critical/performance ethnography has involved a continuous praxis of Sankofa—of physically returning to Portobelo as well as intellectually revising the cultural performances and texts that have emerged out of my praxis in order to correct misconceptions, fill in absences, engage in critical reflexivity, and move this study forward. For the past fourteen years, I have maintained a consistent pattern of fieldwork and homework. These “fields” have included personal and official archives in Panama and in the United States as well as dancing between “the academy” and “the community” as sites of valuation and meaning-making. Staged dialogical performance/
performance ethnography has been one of the key ways that I have traversed these fields. Likewise, interpersonal dialogical performance has helped me to engage with coperformers related to the tradition in both spaces.

Congo traditions in Panama are rich cultural sites through which to explore how African-descended communities in various towns throughout the Atlantic coast of the Republic as well as a few scattered communities along the Pacific have recorded and revised their specific histories of colonial engagement through cultural performances. This study concludes like the figure of the egg in the Sankofa bird’s mouth—with a call for the important work that remains to be done about the variety of contemporary Congo performances in Panama and how communities have come to their current point of embodiment as well as what traces of Kongo history and culture may be gleaned through them. Although official narratives of Congo performance point toward uniformity of colonial encounter and contemporary expression, the Devil, as always, is in the details.