Migrants and Migration in Modern North America
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The populations and social systems of the Caribbean basin have been shaped by each of the great global migrations of the modern era. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries forced migration carried some 4.6 million Africans into this region. In the generations after emancipation in 1838, over 400,000 South Asian indentured migrants traveled to the British Caribbean. Nearly 180,000 Chinese immigrants reached the region in the same era. Meanwhile the last decades of the nineteenth century saw the creation of a system of circular migration in which hundreds of thousands of Afro-Caribbeans left the British territories for work in the booming export economies of the Spanish-speaking rimlands and islands, a movement that reached its heyday after the First World War. Caribbean migration to the United States—to Harlem, most of all—soared in the same era.

Unprecedented steps by the hemisphere’s receiving societies in the 1920s and 1930s to exclude potential migrants on the basis of racial “unassimilability” ruptured the circum-Caribbean migratory sphere and, in doing so, profoundly shifted the twentieth-century trajectories of British Caribbean colonies, Spanish American republics, and the North American continent alike. These macropolitical changes reflected a heightened interest by states in the biopolitics of borders—a belief that demography was destiny—which itself responded to the enacted micropolitics of intimate life around the region. Interracial sex had become a key topic for experts and activists writing about the Caribbean, both on the islands and beyond. Some sought to abstract the lessons that the contemporary “science of racial difference” held for Caribbean
peoples; others sought to use Caribbean examples to push debates within the international “science of race.” This chapter places those learned and political debates over race-mixture alongside the traces of actual boundary-crossing sexual contact preserved in judicial testimony, allowing us to observe the everyday interactions through which expressions of intimate desire sometimes underlined, sometimes undermined, group boundaries in the Greater Caribbean. Some immigrant group identities became folded into others; some acquired a retroactive stability they had never known in the era of migration. Both in rhetoric and in practice, collective destinies were shaped by the contours of intimate desire.2

**Population and Migration in the Gran Caribe, 1800–1900**

At the eve of the era of Atlantic revolutions, largely autonomous black, part-black, and indigenous populations dotted the fringes of empire, along the continent’s coastline from Veracruz east to the peninsula of Yucatán, south to Portobello, and east to the Guianas. Over the preceding centuries Spanish, British, French, and Dutch rivalries had provided these heterogeneous populations with useful allies and prevented any colonial state from asserting control over vast stretches of land between the imperial powers’ essential ports. Meanwhile the ports themselves were peopled by negros, mulatos, and pardos, mostly freepeople working as artisans, shipbuilders, muleteers, and militia members.3 Euro-mestizo settlement, in contrast, centered on cities and towns in the fertile valleys of the inland mountain ranges. Around the Caribbean’s rim indigenous populations far outnumbered creole Spaniards and mestizos. The demographic catastrophe of European disease and dislocations had finally abated, and indigenous communities had seen steady growth since the early 1700s. Plantations growing cacao in Venezuela and eastern Costa Rica and sugar in southern Mexico, Guatemala, and Demarara employed Afro-descended slaves—thousands in Venezuela and Demarara, a few hundred in Costa Rica.

News of the slave revolt in 1789 in French Saint Domingue reverberated across this vast region. Fears of a similar African-led conflagration on the British sugar colonies encouraged parliamentary passage of the Amelioration Acts in 1798 and abolition of slave trade aboard British ships in 1807. The refusal of the enslaved on British islands to acquiesce in the fiction that “amelioration” made slavery tolerable and ongoing abolitionist pressures within Great Britain led to passage of apprenticeship legislation in 1833 and to final emancipation in 1838. This did not end the arrival of Africans into the British Caribbean. In the half-century after abolition of the British slave trade, British ships
seized scores of thousands of the hundreds of thousands of enslaved Africans still en route to Cuba, Brazil, and elsewhere. Ten thousand were shipped under contract of indenture to Jamaica, fourteen thousand to British Guiana, and eight thousand to Trinidad. The coloured population of Jamaica (those claiming mixed African and European ancestry) was 68,000 in 1844 and had surpassed 120,000 by 1891; the white population hovered between 15,000 and 13,000 over the same half-century. Trinidad's population of 85,000 in 1861 included a large minority of French creoles whose residence predated British acquisition of the territory; arrival from Venezuela and Portugal as well as Britain continued over the nineteenth century. In 1858 there were some 35,000 Portuguese in British Guiana.

In Spain's remaining insular possessions, technological shifts allowed Cuban sugar production to expand rapidly to fill demand left by Saint Domingue's drop in production. Some 550,000 Africans were transported to Cuba as slaves between 1811 and 1865. Wary of Saint Domingue's fate, Havana's Junta de Fomento in 1796 urged “white colonization in the rural districts” as a balance to the growth in numbers of the enslaved. Hundreds of thousands of Galicians and Canary Islanders arrived over the following two generations; the 1861 census found that 116,000 stayed. Transport of indentured workers from China to Cuba began in 1847; some 142,000 men arrived over the following quarter-century, most from southern Guangdong province. Forced reconstructing meant that most served sixteen years of indenture on the sugar plantations before they moved into more profitable occupations in cities or other regions.

In 1870 Spain passed the Moret Law, promising gradual abolition and imposing restrictions on owners' authority over those left in their “care.” Ongoing pressure by the patrocinados (apprentices) rendered the system unsustainable; the patronato—and with it unfree labor for those of African ancestry—ended in Puerto Rico in 1873 and in Cuba in 1886. Spanish efforts to increase the numbers of loyalists on the island were hardly successful. Between 1882 and 1894 224,000 Spaniards traveled to Cuba and 142,000 returned home, and in 1894 Cuban insurgents launched their ultimately successful war to end Spanish imperial control. Throughout the years of civil unrest, continuous migration linked Cuba to Tampa, where the cigar industry flourished, and southern Florida more broadly. Cayman Islanders and others from nearby British West Indian islands also circulated continuously to and through these ports. The 1890 census counted over twelve thousand souls born in “Cuba or the West Indies” living in the state of Florida.

Indentured South Asian migration from British-controlled India to the British Caribbean began simultaneously with the migration of indentured
Migratory movements into and out of the Caribbean, 1810s–1930s
The interconnected world of the Caribbean, 1840–1940
Chinese into Cuba. Some eighteen thousand indentured Chinese “coolies” reached the British Caribbean in the late nineteenth century, and the label would soon be appropriated for a far larger stream of migrants from British India. More than 36,000 indentured Indian “coolies” reached Jamaica before the system was finally abolished in 1917. But it was the southeastern rimland colonies that most eagerly subsidized the arrival of indentured Asian workers in these years. Nearly 240,000 Indians traveled under contracts of indenture to British Guiana, another 145,000 to Trinidad. In the nearby French islands of Martinique, Guadeloupe, and French Guiana, where slavery was abolished in 1848, some 87,000 Indians were serving terms of indenture by 1885. Another 35,000 would travel from India to Dutch Surinam over the following generation, alongside 22,000 indentured Javanese. By the start of the twentieth century the population of Trinidad included some 150,000 of African or part-African origin, 90,000 East Indians, 5,000 Chinese, and around 50,000 whites of British, French, Spanish, Portuguese, and other descent.

In the same years the descendants of enslaved Africans were taking advantage of their newfound freedom of movement in shorter hops around the eastern Caribbean. Sojourners from the Virgin Islands, St. Kitts, Nevis, and Antigua traveled to Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic in small but ongoing migration after 1880, harvesting sugar and creating distinctive creole-speaking barrios within capitals and major ports. Barbadians circulated to Trinidad and Guiana, Brazil and beyond: departures totaled over fifteen thousand from 1863 to 1870 alone. Bustling Port of Spain had whole neighborhoods filled with immigrants from Barbados, Grenada, St. Vincent, and Dominica. Other Windward Islanders crossed the seven-mile-wide channel that separated Trinidad from Venezuela’s Paria peninsula and established themselves as cacao farmers and small traders. Many thousands labored on the gold fields and rubber-gathering camps deep in the Orinoco rainforest before heading on or heading home.

In the western Caribbean the first two generations after British abolition saw increasing temporary and longer-term movements. Circulation of turtle-men and traders from small English-speaking islands like San Andres and Providencia strengthened the longstanding links between the British islands and outposts and Mesoamerica’s rain-forested eastern lowlands. When the California Gold Rush created an isthmian transport boom in 1849, hundreds of Jamaicans rushed to Panama. Over a thousand of them were contracted by a U.S. company to build a railroad across the isthmus, working alongside a similar number of indentured Chinese laborers.

Panama by 1855 had acquired a cosmopolitan population, arranged in a clear occupational hierarchy according to race and national origin. “The
railroad officials, steamboat agents, foreign consuls, and a score of Yankee traders, hotel-keepers, billiard markers and bar-tenders comprise all the whites, who are the exclusive few,” one visitor wrote. “The better class of shop-keepers are Mulattos from Jamaica, St. Domingo, and the other West Indian islands, while the dispensers of cheap grog, and hucksters of fruit and small wares are chiefly negroes. The main body of the population is made up of laborers, negroes from Jamaica, yellow natives of mixed African and Indian blood, and sad, sedate, turbaned Hindoos, the poor exiled Coolies from the Ganges.”20 Those Chinese workers who survived the horrendous conditions of railroad construction usually moved on to the Pacific coastal destinations—from Peru in the south to California in the north—drawing large numbers of their countrymen in the same years, or headed from Panama’s Atlantic railroad terminus to the main ports of the western Caribbean: Havana, Santiago de Cuba, and Kingston (where they were among the first Chinese arrivals).21 Afro-Jamaican workers too were more likely to move on than to head home.

A western Caribbean labor market emerged as projects like the Ferrocarril al Atlántico in Costa Rica drew thousands of English-speaking black migrants. A thousand indentured Chinese, contracted by the railroad boss Minor Keith in California, Honduras, and Macao in 1872–73, labored on the Costa Rican railroad project alongside several thousand Afro-Caribbeans and nearly two thousand Italians (the latter’s arrival arranged by Keith and subsidized by a Costa Rican state eager to introduce, in Keith’s phrase, “select breeding stock”).22 Over the following generation a few thousand Spaniards, Italians, and Germans would dock at Central America’s Caribbean ports and head to the highlands, where they became overseers, managers, and merchants in the burgeoning coffee sector.

The efforts of Ferdinand de Lesseps of France to build a sea-level canal across the isthmus of Panama from 1881 to 1889 drew on these well-established migratory connections and created new ones. Thousands of men and women from French-speaking islands of the eastern Caribbean sailed west to seek work. Labor recruiters advertised in the Jamaican press and hired on the docks of Kingston. Still, most British Caribbeans headed to Colón without contract, from Port Limon (Puerto Limón), Bocas del Toro, or Montego Bay.23 Recruiters aimed to sign on workers who would stay put, but Western Caribbeans preferred to cycle through. Jamaican departures for Panama topped 24,000 in 1883; over eleven thousand returned in the same year. Such was the demand generated by the massive influx of mostly male workers that washer-women from Kingston picked up laundry in Colón to wash, starch, and press on the island and return on the next steamer.24 In all some fifty thousand British islanders reached Panama in these years.25 The new cycle of isthmian
prosperity also drew Chinese immigrants whose second eight-year term of indenture in Cuba was just ending. By 1890 the Chinese population of Panama numbered around three thousand.

The Heyday of U.S. Investment and Intraregional Migration, 1900–1930

U.S. intervention in the Cuban War of Independence in 1898 brought Puerto Rico into permanent colonial status and Cuba into a more partial and punctuated political subordination. The new Panamanian state rewarded U.S. aid to the independence effort with the concession “in perpetuity” of a ten-mile wide strip of land to complete the canal abandoned by the French. Workers arriving under contract to the U.S. government’s Isthmian Canal Commission (ICC) included 20,000 Barbadians, 7,500 from the French colonies of Guadeloupe and Martinique, 8,000 Spaniards, 2,000 Italians, and 1,000 Greeks.

However, personal networks mobilized many more migrants than labor recruiters did. By 1907 the number of potential workers reaching the docks of Colón on their own—mostly British West Indians—was more than double the number arriving under contract. The 20,000 Barbadian contract workers were matched by another 25,000 men and women who paid their own passage from Barbados. Tens of thousands from smaller islands of the eastern Caribbean joined them. But as before, it was Jamaicans who dwarfed all other migrants to Panama; some 80,000 to 90,000 made the journey in the era of construction. The 1912 census found 389 men (and one woman) born in India residing in the Canal Zone, but several times that number surely resided outside of U.S. territory, in the Republic of Panama. Chinese immigration, putatively illegal, continued apace. A new program of forced registration of Chinese men in 1913 found some 7,300 in residence on the isthmus.

Beyond Panama agricultural and extractive exports expanded across the Greater Caribbean as U.S. direct foreign investment, already well established in Cuba, spread. The United Fruit Company (UFCo), born in 1898, was by far the largest single plantation employer of men (and on the islands, women). Along the coastal lowlands of eastern Guatemala, northern Honduras, and northern Colombia, United Fruit took over existing regional systems of smallholder production; in British Honduras, northern Nicaragua, southeast Costa Rica, and western Panama, it claimed and cut vast tracts of tropical rainforest. Now stevedores and passengers circulated from the Greater Caribbean through New Orleans, United Fruit’s main port of entry for bananas from Central America. Nevertheless the total numbers of Cuban- or West Indies–born residents of Louisiana was never more than a few hundred in this period.

Rising U.S. investment redoubled the long-established pattern in which
overseas capital underwrote dense populations of coerced workers and intensive monocrop production. United Fruit Company banana and citrus plantations in Jamaica employed thousands by the 1920s. U.S. capital and trade preferences fueled a steady expansion of sugar plantations in Cuba and the Dominican Republic, which boomed when the disruption of European beet-sugar production during the First World War sent prices sky-high. The harvest season of 1920 brought over 27,000 Jamaicans and 36,000 Haitians to Cuban shores in a single year. All told, sugar plantations in eastern Cuba drew hundreds of thousands of workers from Jamaica and Haiti; plantations in the western Dominican Republic relied on Haitian seasonal migrants, while those in the south employed tens of thousands from the eastern British Caribbean. In the early 1920s several thousand British West Indians entered the Dominican Republic for each harvest. Some ten thousand British West Indians, mostly Jamaicans, reached Haiti in the same years, and 1932 found three to four thousand still resident there, hungry and unemployed.

Meanwhile Chinese entry to Cuba, restricted in 1899, was permitted again as sugar production boomed. Cuba’s Chinese population had dropped from over 40,000 in 1877 to just over 10,000 in 1919, but rose to nearly 25,000 by 1931. Dwarfing all other migrant streams, immigration from Spain accelerated continuously. More than 800,000 Spaniards entered Cuba between 1902 and 1931, over 94,000 of them in 1920 alone. In 1931 the population of Cuba included 250,000 persons born in Spain. The same census registered 102,000 blacks born outside Cuba.

Export production also expanded in the eastern Caribbean, although British rather than U.S. capital predominated. Trinidad’s East Indian population, 120,000 strong, remained the mainstay of that island’s sugar labor force. Meanwhile hard-up neighborhoods of Port of Spain swelled with migrants from nearby small islands where economic opportunities were even scarcer. By 1946 the population of Trinidad included 12,000 Barbadians and 36,000 Windward Islanders. The first commercial oil well began producing in Trinidad in 1902, and by the 1920s more than ten thousand men, Trinidadians and small islanders, had traveled to work on the oilfields. Some ten thousand eastern Caribbeans found work on the oilfields of Maracaibo, Venezuela, after production began there in 1916; a generation later the population of Trinidad would include over three thousand people born in Venezuela in this era. In turn, new refineries in Curacao and Aruba drew thousands from Trinidad and Barbados beginning in the interwar years. Venezuela’s ports and cities continued to attract traders and tradesmen, and Afro-Antillean entries into Venezuela totaled from six to eleven thousand annually throughout the first three decades of the twentieth century.
In sum, the expansion of export production on the islands and rimlands of the Greater Caribbean had created both new opportunities and new constraints for the region’s working people. On the one hand, new plantations and extractive enterprises offered new wage sources from which remittances could be sent home, whether home was a few parishes or many islands away. Ports grew, and with them service economies and attendant opportunities for independent entrepreneurship, often in women’s hands: boardinghouses, sidewalk vending, laundry, prostitution. Expanded banana plantations in areas not previously under intensive cultivation (like northeast Honduras, eastern Nicaragua, southern Costa Rica, and western Panama) encroached on lands crucial to indigenous populations’ subsistence. But as locals lost autonomy along the rimlands, newcomers gained it. In contrast, on the far more densely populated islands the expansion of fruit plantations made peasant smallholds ever harder to sustain, increasing land pressure and driving up taxes.

The circum-Caribbean migratory system drew the grandchildren of British Caribbean freedmen and freedwomen out of rural island communities to rimland jungles and docks in the first decades of the twentieth century and then spun those migrants’ children and grandchildren onward in turn, now to urban employment: on the islands of their grandparents’ birth, in the Spanish American republics of their own birth, and in the industrialized economies of Europe and North America. By 1906 to 1912 movement from the Caribbean to New York reached a pace nearly equaling the well-established flow to Florida, and by the 1920s surpassed it. Some seven thousand black immigrants to the United States in the first three decades of the twentieth century gave Central America as their last region of residence. The number of British West Indians who reached the United States via Cuba was doubtless many times greater. Black immigration from the Caribbean to the United States averaged 3,500 per year from 1903 to 1913, climbed to 5,000 per year from 1914 to 1923, and surpassed 10,000 in 1924 alone. All told over 100,000 Afro-Caribbeans entered the United States in the first quarter of the twentieth century, and many stayed. The 1930 census recorded 74,500 “Negroes” of West Indian birth.

Small numbers of Afro-Caribbeans also traveled to Canada in the first decades of the twentieth century: women to work as domestic servants under a short-lived contracting scheme, men laboring in mines in Nova Scotia and elsewhere. Dense shipping lanes linked the eastern Caribbean to Newfoundland and thus made it possible for individual trajectories to tie eastern Canada into the circum-Caribbean circuits described above. In 1912–15 annual West Indian entry into Canada totaled around two hundred people; it would not top those numbers until policies and prospects were remade after the Second World War. Even on the basis of the very small-scale interwar
movement, in the Maritimes, Toronto, and Montreal communities formed and institutions were built, including churches, chapters of the United Negro Improvement Association, and fraternal lodges.\textsuperscript{50}

**Breachable Boundaries in a Heterogeneous World**

Using the broadest strokes, contemporary authors described migrant flows with reference to their territories of origin, continental ancestry, color, and imperial filiation. Yet these broad collectives were both crossed by individuals and redrawn over time. Fundamental to both the maintenance and the remaking of social boundaries were matters of sex. Ultimately it was the intimate encounters between migratory men and women that determined the contours of collective identities over time. In this sense any analysis of Caribbean migration demands attention to both the micro- and macro-politics of desire.

One factor shaping patterns of kinship and sexuality within and between groups in the Caribbean was the demographic composition of migrant streams. Overall the larger the distance between origin and destination, the greater the predominance of men. Women were fewest in the earliest years of a new migratory movement; the number of women and children then increased over time; more women migrated to cities than to rural areas. Exceptions occurred when employers or public officials dictated specific gender criteria. Migrants contracted to labor on the Panama Canal were exclusively male. East Indian migrants traveling under indenture to Trinidad, Guyana, and Jamaica included a relatively high proportion of women because British imperial officials went to great effort to recruit women, hoping to increase the number of South Asian migrants who remained past their term of indenture. Because of the strictures of indenture, East Indian women’s patterns of residence were just as rural as East Indian men’s, and even after indenture ended they were significantly more likely than Afro-Caribbean women to be directly employed on plantations.\textsuperscript{51}

In the early years of migration to Panama, Central America, and Cuba, British West Indian settlements might include eight or ten times as many men as women. Conversely, the migrant flows that were largest in volume, most urban in destination, least shaped by employers’ recruitment, and most enduring included the largest number of women. One can see the impact of recruitment, for instance, in the fact that Barbadians living in the Canal Zone in 1912 numbered 7,400 men and only 1,500 women, while Jamaicans in the same census had 12,000 men and 8,000 women. The same dynamic dictated that the Chinese population of Cuba was almost exclusively male, while Chi-
nese populations elsewhere (the product of individual migration rather than indentured contracting), though still heavily male, contained a few more women. Cuba’s Chinese population was from 97 to 99 percent male in every census from the start of indenture through 1943.52 Guatemala’s total Chinese population in 1940 comprised 629 men and 41 women; in Honduras in 1930 the numbers were 265 men and 13 women; in Costa Rica in 1927 it was 580 men and 153 women.53

The population of the Republic of Panama in 1930 included 9,900 foreign whites, 26,900 foreign blacks, 4,900 foreign mestizos, 1,300 foreign mulatos, and 3,000 foreigners of “yellow” race. Men outnumbered women 10 to 1 among “yellow,” but only 1.5 to 1 among whites and only 1.3 to 1 among blacks.54 Costa Rica’s 29,000 foreign-born in 1927 included 11,000 whites, 11,000 blacks, 5,800 mestizos, 800 mulatos, and 480 of “yellow” race. Foreign-born men outnumbered women by 1.8 to 1 among whites, 1.7 to 1 among blacks, 1.5 to 1 among mestizos, and over 10 to 1 among the “yellow” population.55 But these national figures masked huge regional variations. British West Indian women were most numerous in Colón, Panama City, the Canal Zone, Santiago de Cuba, Havana, and Port Limon. The same ports drew Spanish-speaking mestizas from small towns and the countryside farther inland, beyond the plantation zone.56

In the banana zones and bustling ports of Central America, sex was structured by a wide array of arrangements: some involving long-term expectations of support, many not; some involving the immediate exchange of cash, many not; some preceded by formal church or state sanction, many not; some involving outright violence, many not. Categories in use at the time termed these relations consensual partnership, prostitution, marriage, or rape. One can find examples of each of these enacted between men and women of the same origin, and between men and women separated by gulfs of language, nationality, ancestry, wealth, and power as well. “Things was rugged in them days,” one Yankee old-timer recalled in 1933, describing life a quarter-century earlier when United Fruit was just opening operations in Puerto Barrios, Guatemala, “but you could get a gal for a fishhook, and fishhooks was two for a nickel in the commissary.”57 U.S. banana men’s reminiscences from the 1920s and 1930s also record the existence of established couples: a “white Jamaican” overseer and “his ‘woman,’” a “good-looking and very pleasant black Jamaican, [like him] born in Costa Rica,” living together in Chiriquí, Panama; a German overseer, Charley Lanz, and “Maria, at best half Indian who had had other protectors before she acquired Charley,” raising their twin boys on a Honduran plantation.58

Other tales leave no doubt that in the zona bananera forced sex was com-
mon and female consent a fungible concept. However, women were not automatically or inherently disempowered in heavily male settings. To the contrary, the very fact of male demographic predominance created a seller’s market for traditionally female services, including laundry, meals, and sex. The British author Winifred James, living in Bocas de Toro in 1913, wrote with amusement that her husband “picked up a letter one day which turned out to be from one of the best known ladies of pleasure in the town. Every week a contingent of them go up the line in the pay train. It was to her ‘sweet-man’ telling him about her profits that week-end and adjuring him not to fret for she was ‘thinking of him all the time.’ The world is a quaint place.”

James smiled at the notion that sex work could be compatible with an ongoing conjugal partnership, but the historical record makes clear that romance was integral to the lives of sex workers in Caribbean Central America.

Just what a given intimate partnership entailed in terms of economic and extended family obligations could be a matter of contention. Therese Jones, from Trinidad, traveled to Panama on her own some time around 1908 and set up a cantina in Portobello. She moved in with the Barbadian George Springer in 1910 and later agreed to marry him. In February 1913 Springer went to Barbados to visit his ailing mother; Therese gave him 230 pesos in silver for the round-trip passage. When he ran through that money before buying passage home, Therese sent along another 30 pesos in gold. Once back in Colón, Springer refused to seek work. He told Therese to open another cantina like the one she had had in Portobello; she replied that he should try to get hired at the Canal Commission. When he ignored her and continued to expect her to cover their rent and expenses she decided to separate, start a new business in Bocas del Toro, and find a new (Trinidadian) man.

Folks in polyglot ports like Limon, Colón, and Bocas clearly thought about sex in terms of race: to be accused of “whoring with Chinese” was a commonly hurled insult among Spanish-speakers and English-speakers alike in Port Limon, and occasioned no end of civil suits over “damaged reputation” and injured pride. Sexual intimacy with Chinese was evidently regarded as particularly transgressive. But while racial boundaries mattered in thinking about sex, which boundaries counted as racial was never fixed.

Discussing “sex across boundaries” in the context of migration risks reifying the very divides we wish to question. Divisions between Hindu and Muslim South Asians, between French-creole- and English-creole-speaking islands within the British Caribbean were vitally important but—just like those between “trinitarios” and “true Venezuelans” or between “afroantillanos” and “native Panamanians”—never as eternal as those who insisted on them supposed. As Aisha Khan points out, there was never an original moment of un-
mixed purity for any migrant group in the Caribbean. Categories acquired retroactive homogeneity only as certain differences were silenced or redefined as insignificant.\textsuperscript{65}

To narrate the story of migration and settlement in the Caribbean it is necessary to use categories, and simplest to use the categories of collective identity that appear most basic in the present. But the resulting tautology obscures the fact that current lines of division are the \textit{result} of past choices regarding alliance, avoidance, and self-definition, rather than the \textit{cause} or explanation of them. Even divisions based on continent of origin, for which we use labels thought of as racial (black, white, East Indian, Chinese) are the results. Over the first half of the twentieth century Caribbean Jews went from being routinely categorized as Oriental to being routinely categorized as white.\textsuperscript{66} The division between French-speaking islanders and English-speaking islanders was jealously guarded at some migrant destinations, only to be erased not only from practice but from memory a few generations later.\textsuperscript{67} And in some places East Indians started off black and became \textit{afrodescendientes}.

With our perceptions guided by late-twentieth-century racial constructs, it seems obvious that Afro-Caribbeans were black, because African, and East Indians were brown, because Asian. Yet Costa Rican journalist Antonio Zambrano, describing the rail line just south of Port Limon in 1895, noted the “crops of the \textit{coolies}, the yucca clusters, the plantings of yam and beans, of sugar cane and of the many other things that the East Indian black [\textit{el negrito de las Indias Orientales}] cultivates to supply the Limon market” and went on to rave about the “girls of brilliant ebony in whose breasts nubility trembles” who made up this (East Indian) community’s youth.\textsuperscript{68}

The racial coordinates of South Asian immigrants—their degree of distance from Afro-descended British West Indians in particular—were just not that clear in Limon. Across the British Caribbean the term “coolie” (also “cooleyman” or “cooley-gal”) was applied to South Asian migrants, the terms “china-man” or “chiney” to the Chinese. In 1912, the Costa Rican president outlawed all further entry into Costa Rica by “individuals of the ‘cooli’ class.” But whose arrival, exactly, had been forbidden? The central government consulted local medical professors and the published works of German ethnographers. The governor of Limón tried to help too: “By their special physiognomy they are easily recognized at first sight: of copper color, they speak not English but a dialect; they are filthy in their dress to the extreme that they exhale an unsupportable stench; it is their custom not to bathe, but instead grease their whole body with coconut oil.” They arrived in small groups, under the command of a boss who translated and signed contracts; sometimes they all wore a towel wrapped around their heads; others who arrived separately wore velvet caps
and dedicated themselves to peddling. They refused to work with either machete or axe, preferring to live from theft and arson.69

Yet despite these supposed bodily, sartorial, and characterological markers, coolies did not form a group apart in Limon. References to “culis” appear occasionally in judicial testimonies from the first decades of the twentieth century in Limon, but so do references to “jamaicanos” born in “Indostan.” A Jamaica-born “Jhon Gupi (culi)” was accused in 1911 of causing one “Mari Hall, Culi” to die of fright in Cieneguita (the community Zambrano had described as the center of East Indian settlement fifteen years earlier). The witnesses against Gupi included Joseph Nish Foley, born in “Indostan,” and Foley’s son Charles Bennet, “jamaicano.”70 “Coolies” and “Jamaicans” overlapped at the level of daily life as well as at the level of rhetoric. In 1906 the Afro-Jamaican Joaquin Thompson Porkins killed his consensual partner, a “cooli woman.”71 References to “coolies” also appear occasionally in the English-language press of Port Limon as late as the 1930s, when an irate letter from “Mr. Ramsay Dosha, an East India planter” long established in the region, explained that the label “cooie” was “detestably insulting” to his people.72 Every indication from newspaper references is that East Indians were fully integrated into the heavily Jamaican social world of English-speaking black Limon, attending weddings and parties alongside other members of the port’s fiercely respectable middle class. Today Costa Ricans profess no knowledge that immigrants from South Asia ever reached their shores; no academic account of Limon’s past mentions their presence; and the tag *negro culí* is identified by some aging highlanders as referring to “a really dark-skinned negro; you know, the ones who are almost blue-black.”73

In Panama in the first years of the twentieth century “babú” rather than “cooie” became standard slang for South Asian immigrants, perhaps because the term “cooie” was already in use among North Americans on the isthmus for the many Chinese immigrants there. Ideas about Chinese migrants drawn from other Pacific settings certainly shaped perceptions of race in Panama. The Canal Zone census taker Harry Franck reported in 1913: “Almost every known race mingles in Panama city, even to Chinese coolies in their umbrella hats and rolled up cotton trousers, delving in rich market gardens on the edges of the town or dog-trotting through the streets under two baskets dancing on the ends of a bamboo pole, till one fancies oneself at times in Singapore or Shanghai.”74 Notably larger than Costa Rica’s South Asian population from the start, Panama’s self-described *hindostanos* chose to build difference rather than blend in, founding temples and mosques; Hindu, Muslim, and mixed cricket clubs; and a *Sociedad Hindostana de Panama*, inaugurated on the occasion of Indian Independence in 1947, which remains active to this day—
a stark contrast to the “negritos de las Indias Orientales” just up the coast in Port Limon, whose choice of Afro-Antillean partners both reflected and hastened the dissolution of the line separating East from West Indian there.75

While export economies were booming and immigrants welcomed across the region, some observers offered optimistic visions of the role that difference and desire would play in shaping the Americas. “Now that the emigration of our people is creating so much attention,” wrote the pseudonymous “Mountain Man” in the Kingston Daily Gleaner in 1917, “It would seem as if there must eventually be a fusion of all the races in America, and a race of super-man evolved. The Jamaican young women in emigrating in such large numbers to the States, may be obeying an instinct which we do not at present understand, and the effects of which will be powerfully felt in the centuries to come. Who knows?”76 But ultimately this hopeful vision of the fusion of immigrants into a single “race of super-man” would find scant support, whether on islands or rimlands, in Havana or Washington. The spirit of the coming era was captured instead in a letter adjacent to Mountain Man’s, from a pseudonymous “AUSTRALIAN” who attacked “Oriental” immigration to Jamaica and concluded, “We must turn the flood of Chinese into another channel. Let them try Cuba or Puerto Rico, so that we may see and get an object lesson as to how the Americans handle such problems. For the sake of our future population we might pass a law requiring every Chinaman coming here in future to bring his Chinese wife with him. This would avoid another ‘colour problem’ in the future.”77 Within this paradigm sex across boundaries was the problem, not the solution: and race-based immigration restriction the proper antidote.

The Science of Difference and Desire and Its Policy Implications

For contemporary observers the claim that racial groupings reflect cultural constructs rather than biological entities would have seemed absurd. The early-twentieth-century Atlantic world saw the zenith of scientific racism as a paradigm for understanding collective difference. Group boundaries were understood to reflect biological divides that sexual intimacy breached literally and irreversibly. While some early-twentieth-century authorities agreed with Mountain Man that the biological fusion of races as a result of migration and sex could be a good thing, more voices insisted along with “AUSTRALIAN” that breeding and interbreeding by immigrants threatened receiving societies at their very core. Thus debates over the contours and consequences of sexual intimacy became central to policy debates in the interwar Atlantic, particularly regarding immigration policy.

The Caribbean became a privileged place to observe the impacts of race
crossing. In 1908 the statistician Karl Pearson of University College, London, began corresponding with Isaac Costa, a doctor in Jamaica. Pearson sought empirical evidence to reconcile the Mendelian model of plant hybridity to the world of humankind, where the unitariness of black and white races seemed self-evident but outcomes refused to conform to expectations. Pearson’s questions poured forth: “Mulatto + white gives a quadroon. Is this again a blend? Our theorists would say it must consist of half whites and half mulattos in number. I should have thought that the quadroon was lighter in skin than the mulatto. . . . and that pure white skins did not occur in 50% of quadroons.” “Mulatto + mulatto. Is this usually a mulatto in colour? Our theorists say 25% are pure white skins, 25% pure black skins, and only 50% mulattos.” Dr. Costa replied with the disdain of an elevated insider, calling the ideas of the theorists “ridiculously incorrect.” “There are now and then slight variations from the usual mulatto brown or mulatto-yellow,” he reported, “but you may be quite certain that no pure black skins or pure white skins come from mulatto + mulatto. You can state this dogmatically.” When Pearson published “A Note on the Skin-Colour of Negro and White Crosses from Information Received from the West Indies” in *Biometrika* the following year, photos and letters from Costa were his only data.

Caribbean politics as well as Caribbean bodies were read for data on the impact of race mixing. Pearson’s contemporary Harry Johnston cheered on the influx of Spaniards into Cuba circa 1910, without which the island “had a considerable chance in the near future of developing into another Haiti or a San Domingo.” Were it not for Spaniards’ arrival and enfranchisement “the
'coloured' vote would soon have amounted to a third of the total, and before long to a half, and finally have preponderated over the white element—with what effect on public order or efficiency it is difficult to say, since the Cuban negro . . . has not yet been sufficiently tried in positions of responsibility and public trust to have established a racial character, good or bad.”

A contrasting set of claims about the political outcomes of interracial sex animated one of the most widely debated works on imperial rule in its day, Sydney Olivier’s *White Capital and Coloured Labour* (1910). Olivier was an Oxford-educated Fabian Socialist, longtime Colonial Office official, and governor of Jamaica from 1907 to 1913. The book is an extended brief against “colour-prejudice and race antagonism” and the “negrophobist theory of exclusion.” Yet Olivier’s is an antiracism that reifies race at every turn, as he attributes political and social processes of all kinds to the ancestral inheritance of those involved. Hence “the future of the relations between White Capital and Coloured Labor depends so largely on the possibility of Race-fusion either by the bodily process of blending by intermarriage, or by some alternative psychical process of establishing sympathetic understanding, that we must establish what . . . has been done in this direction in those communities in which people of European and African races have been forced into social contact.”

In other words, the future of modern capitalism and colonialism depended on lessons drawn from a past of sex across boundaries in the Caribbean.

For Olivier, relying on the West Indies as his constant example, it was indisputable that “a colony of black, coloured, and whites has far more organic efficiency and far more promise in it than a colony of black and white alone.” Other observers drew opposite conclusions. One traveler, A. Hyatt Verrill, informed his readers that within the Jamaican middle class, those of “both races and all colors . . . are all socially equal and . . . freely intermarry.” For Verrill this arrangement must be inherently unstable, given that “the primitive negro strain is far more virile than the white, and there is a constant tendency for offspring of mixed blood to revert to the African rather than to the Anglo-Saxon type. . . . And it is an established biological fact that, should the intermarriage of the two races continue, the result would be, not the absorption of the negro race by the Caucasian, but the annihilation of the Caucasian by the negro, with a wholly colored community as the ultimate result.” As Verrill’s passage underlines, questions about the individual biological consequences of “interracial” unions and the society-wide political consequences of race-mixing were inextricable. The essence of race in the eugenicist paradigm was that it represented the point of fusion of individual and collective destinies.

Thus as demography and population dynamics came to the fore in prescriptions for national progress, the question of who might have sex with whom
and with what results was always at issue in debates over migration control. This is evident in the testimony by the Princeton economist Robert Foerster before the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Immigration and Naturalization in March 1925. The topic was “The Racial Problems Involved in Immigration from Latin America, the West Indies, and Canada,” an exploration of the implications of the decision embodied in the Johnson-Reed Act (1924) to leave immigrants to the United States from all “American republics” outside the quota system, that is, their volume of entry subject to no numerical cap. Like many before him, Foerster found that “the most notable racial aspect of Latin America doubtless has been the crossing of races.”

Where Sydney Olivier had seen in sexual contact the possibility of blending and harmony, Foerster saw disharmony, asymmetry, and a need for utmost caution. “The effects of race mixture are still far from being understood. . . . [D]espite the fact that important studies are today being pursued in various parts of the world, the difficulties in ascertaining race elements in parentage and of distinguishing environmental or social influences from hereditary or physical influences are such that exact knowledge, except of limited aspects, is likely to remain scanty.” Yet there was no need to let this state of scholarly ignorance put the brakes on policy advising. State-of-the-art science left no doubt: hybrids at best would be inferior to the superior strain and at worst even less fit than the inferior strain. Radical restriction of immigration from Latin America and the Caribbean was essential to the future stability and harmony of the United States.

Prominent among the “important studies” of race mixing under way was that conducted in Jamaica by Charles Davenport, head of the Eugenics Record Office, and his research associate Dr. Morris Steggerda. Financed by the Carnegie Institution and published in 1929, Race Crossing in Jamaica included anthropometric surveys, intelligence testing, and psychological evaluations of adolescent students at Mico College. Steggerda and Davenport reported that the “mulattos” among their subjects suffered dangerous physical disharmonies, and insisted that statistics showing coloured subjects’ success on intelligence tests masked the unusual frequency of “muzzle-headedness” they had observed among these experimental subjects.

Even at the time such views were contested. W. E. Castle mocked Daven-
port’s and Steggerda’s Jamaican research in Science in 1930, particularly their stress on a half-centimeter differential in mean leg length minus mean arm length. Castle concluded, “We like to think of the Negro as inferior. We like to think of Negro-white crosses as a degradation of the white race. We look for evidence in support of the idea and try to persuade ourselves that we have found it even when the resemblance is very slight. The honestly made records of Davenport and Steggerda tell a very different story about hybrid Jamaicans from that which Davenport and Jennings tell about them in broad sweeping statements.”

Davenport fired back a fierce defense of the significance of his team’s statistical findings and of the biological reality of race. Hybrids do not harmonize; stock determines psyche; demography is destiny.

These were the messages that Davenport and his deputy Harry Laughlin carried to the Pan American Conferences of Eugenics and Homiculture in Cuba in 1927 and in Buenos Aires in 1934, along with new “Model Immigration Law” templates and an implicit threat of future U.S. restrictions on immigration from Spanish American republics. While representatives from some of the larger South American nations called such diagnoses and prescriptions into question, those from the Spanish-speaking republics of the circum-Caribbean did not. Representatives from Panama and Cuba spoke vehemently in favor of Davenport’s proposals, insisting on a distinction between their nations’ “own” populations of partial African ancestry and the undesirable recent immigrants of color who could not and should not be assimilated. Davenport’s proposals regarding premarital screening and prevention of reproduction by the “unfit” proved too controversial for the Latin American delegates to countenance, but his proposed language regarding immigration restriction was adopted whole cloth—and made patent that the issue at stake was reproductive crossing, that is, sex with natives. “The nations of America will issue and apply laws of immigration with intention to bar the entry into their territory of individuals from races whose association with the natives may be considered biologically undesirable.”

Declarations by Hispanic Caribbean delegates at the Pan American Conference, like the contemporaneous speeches of populist politicians back home, ignored the long history of circum-Caribbean migration and mixing; and proclaimed the United States responsible for having introduced “alien” and “undesirable” populations into their territories in the first place. The muckraking progressive journalist Carleton Beals echoed in 1931 the anti-imperialist arguments made by these mestizo populists: the “Negroes who swarm out of overpopulated Haiti, Jamaica and Trinidad . . . are the breeders of this vast circle of ocean, island, and sky . . . [T]he Negro brought even greater love and lust than the natives . . . So his kind have multiplied and continue to multiply in
a frenzy of fertility and magic.” Ultimately, “The Caribbean is an enormous black incubator,” whose swarming offspring have been harnessed to the interests of U.S. capital. Corporate activities “disseminated the Negro race” ever more widely in a process that brings “growing denationalization and cultural chaos,” pushing islands “to fall under self-perpetuating tyrannies completely servile to American interests.”

Thus the late 1920s and 1930s saw Spanish American republics drawn into dialogue with northern eugenicism precisely as populist nativism intensified in response to regional economic crisis. As reformist middle-class politicians struggled to wrest control of nation-states from the old oligarchies, nonwhite immigrants and their descendents became the targets of racist invective and legislative exclusion across the Greater Caribbean. New laws restricted black entry, employment, and naturalization at site after site. They also added new penalties to the restrictions on “Asiatic,” “yellow,” “Mongolian,” and Middle Eastern immigration that had been legislated a generation earlier. New anti-black legislation was passed in Honduras in 1923 and 1926, in El Salvador in 1925, in Guatemala in 1936, in Panama in 1926, 1928, and 1941, in Costa Rica in 1942, in Cuba in 1933, and in Venezuela in 1929. Movement from the British Caribbean to the United States was similarly barred after 1924, the Johnson-Reed act made to function as a ban on British West Indian migration despite its race-neutral language.

Extralegal violence by police and others toward nonwhite non-citizens rose markedly as well, especially in Cuba, Venezuela, and the Dominican Republic—where the scapegoating of black migrants reached its nadir with the slaughter of some fifteen thousand Haitians and Dominicans of Haitian ancestry in the border region, on the orders of the country’s dictator Rafael Leonidas Trujillo in 1937. As doors slammed shut across the region, once-proud working-class emigrants hunkered down in ethnic enclaves within increasingly hostile lands, or headed back to their islands of origin, some penniless, some physically disabled by hard labor or abuse. The multigenerational saga of migrants who expanded transnational kin networks and created new routes to partial prosperity reached a grim denouement of falling wages and state racism, lean pickings nearby, and no easy way out. For earlier generations the borders of nation and empire had been extraordinarily porous in this region of islands and littorals, small craft and steamers. But in the 1920s and 1930s statesmen and scholars collaborated to impose borderlines based on skin color, birthplace, and assumed genetic heritage in a region that had been built out of mixing. Like all borders these supposed divides were in fact permeable; yet that truth did not stop states from transforming the seductive fiction of difference into the most rigid barriers they could build.
Notes

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12 Slavery was ended in Spanish Hispaniola in the context of the Haitian invasion in 1821; the lands east of Haiti attained definitive independence as the Dominican Republic in 1865.


14 Historical census data calculated through the Historical Census Browser of the University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus.


26 Indentured Chinese emigration to Cuba was cut off in 1874 in response to repeated abuses; 142,000 Chinese men had reached the island under indenture over the course of the preceding quarter-century. See López, “One Brings Another,” 94.


30 Velma Newton, *The Silver Men: West Indian Labour Migration to Panama, 1850–1914* (Jamaica: Institute for Social and Economic Research, 1984); Bonham Richardson,
Panama Money in Barbados, 1900–1920 (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985), 125.


32 Kingston continued to be a crucial way station. For instance, in 1908 it was reported that “of the last two batches of Chinese who arrived here there are not three left in Jamaica now. . . . [T]hey have all left for Bocas del Toro, Colon and Bluefields.” “Chinese Depart?,” Kingston Daily Gleaner, June 1–2, 1908, p. 3.

33 Mon, “Procesos de Integración,” 85.

34 Figures calculated through the Historical Census Browser of the University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus.

35 Cuba, Secretaría de Hacienda, Sección de Estadística, Informe y movimiento de pasajeros . . . (Havana, 1921).


37 PRO, CO 318/406/2: Immigration of British West Indians to Central and South America.


40 Cuba, Censo de 1943 (Havana: P. Fernandez, 1945), 888–89.

41 Roberts, Population of Jamaica, 131.


44 Wright, Café con leche, 77–78.

45 Historical census data calculated through the Historical Census Browser of the University of Virginia, Geospatial and Statistical Data Center. http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/.


48 Archivo Nacional de Panamá (ANP), Crim 2445 c141 RPAM, Sección Jurídica, Juzgado
Tercero Circuito, exp. 4876, iniciado el 18 de diciembre de 1916 en la corregiduría de Santa Ana.


51 Lara Putnam, “Migración y género en la organización de la producción: Una comparación de la industria bananera en Costa Rica y Jamaica (1880–1935),” *Memoria del IV Simposio Panamericano de Historia del Instituto Panamericano de Geografía e Historia* (Mexico City: Instituto Panamericano de Geografía e Historia, 2001). The official target for indentured departures from India was set at forty women per hundred emigrants in 1913. It was rarely met. Still, by the end of indentureship in 1921 Indians in Jamaica, for instance, numbered 10,203 men and 8,407 women.


53 Guatemala, Secretaría de Hacienda y Crédito Público, Dirección general de Estadística, *Quinto Censo General de Población, levantado del 7 de abril de 1940* (Guatemala, 1942), 862; Honduras, Dirección General de Estadística, *Resumen del Censo General de Población levantado el 29 de junio de 1930* (Tegucigalpa, 1932), 31; Costa Rican 1927 census data analyzed through Centro Centroamericano de Población, http://censos.ccp.ucr.ac.cr.

54 Panama, Secretaria de Agricultura y Obras Públicas, Dirección general del Censo, *Censo Demográfico de 1930* (Panama: Imprenta Nacional, 1931), 17. Total population was 467,000.

55 Data analyzed through Centro Centroamericano de Población, http://censos.ccp.ucr.ac.cr.


60 Winifred James, *Out of the Shadows* (London, 1924), 57.


62 ANP, Archivo Judicial, Caja Primero Municipal de Colon, Juzgado Primero de Colon, no. 95, 28-5-1915.

64 See Lara Putnam, “Contact Zones: Heterogeneity and Boundaries in Caribbean Central America at the Start of the Twentieth Century,” Iberoamericana [Ibero-amerikanisches Institut, Berlin] 6, no. 23 (September 2006), 113–25.
67 On “patua” negroes see ANP, Caja Primero Municipal de Colon, Juzgado Primero Municipal de Colon, September 6, 1917.
68 Antonio Zambrano, “Crónica de la visita del señor presidente Rafael Iglesias al Puerto de Limón,” El Heraldo de Costa Rica, July 14–August 2, 1895, repr. in Fernando González Vásquez and Elias Zeledon Cartín, comps., Crónicas y relatos para la historia de Puerto Limón (San José, Costa Rica, 1999), 200.
69 ANCR, Policía 06112 (correspondence with the governor of Limon, 1912).
70 ANCR, Limon Juzgado del Crimen 218 (homicidio, 1911).
71 ANCR, Limon Juzgado del Crimen 150 (homicidio, 1906), and for further cases the Limon Juzgado del Crimen for 1911 and 1912.
76 “Migration to America,” Daily Gleaner, November 6, 1917, 13.
78 The last name Costa suggests Sephardic Jewish ancestry. Correspondence makes clear that this wealthy and well-educated doctor considered himself both European and white.
83 Olivier, White Capital and Coloured Labour, 29.


88 Foerster, “The Racial Problems Involved in Immigration from Latin America and the West Indies to the United States,” 330.


93 *Actas*, 323.


97 Lara Putnam, “Unspoken Exclusions: Race, Nation, and Empire in the Immigration Restrictions of the 1920s in North America and the Greater Caribbean,” *Workers...*