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⇒ Contact Zones: Heterogeneity and Boundaries in Caribbean Central America at the Start of the Twentieth Century

Introduction

Large-scale U.S. investment on the Central American isthmus began with the building of the Panama Railroad between 1850 and 1855, paused during the years of the U.S. Civil War, and then expanded rapidly from the 1870s onward, as Central American governments subsidized the building of railroads to Caribbean ports by giving away land concessions that Northern investors parlayed into a multi-million-dollar banana export industry. Yet it was not until a full generation later, when the Roosevelt administration's controversial acquisition of a trans-isthmian canal route in Panama turned the region into the linchpin of the U.S. "struggle for naval and commercial supremacy" (in Theodore Roosevelt's phrase [McCulloch 1977: 254]), that North Atlantic journalists began traveling to Central America in force.

They were invariably amazed by how many other outsiders had gotten there before them. Frederick Upham Adams marveled at the crowd along the wharves in Costa Rica's Caribbean port of Limón one evening in 1913.

Nearly every tropical race and nation has its representatives in this mingling of humanity. Among the laborers or loiterers are Mexicans of various types, Aztec in features and swarthy in hue; exiled revolutionists from Honduras and Nicaragua, looking with suspicion on all who regard them closely; Indian laborers from Guatemala who have wandered thus far from their own country; turbaned Hindoos who are coming into Central America to take the place of natives who fear the lowlands; German merchants and planters who have made Costa Rica their home and are prospering; tourists from New York, London, Paris, and all the world, cool in white flannels—all mingled and touching elbows with an insouciance which goes far to prove the inborn democracy of mankind (Adams 1914: 183).

Adams was being paid to persuade readers of the consensual origins and beneficent impact of United Fruit's "Conquest of the Tropics," and his portrait of insouciant democracy must be read in the light of that project. Yet he was not wrong about the heterogeneity of Caribbean Central America. It was the outcome of short-term, overlapping migrato-

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ry cycles driven by the successive booms and busts of the regional labor markets. As the nineteenth century ended and the twentieth century began, Western Caribbean locales saw successive cycles of demand: for workers to build the infrastructure that sped exports within the accelerating global economy; for fieldworkers to fell rainforests and plant export crops, bananas chief among them; and for laundresses and cooks and card-sharps and coffin-makers and prostitutes to meet the needs of each wave of incoming migrants.

By the time Frederick Adams visited Port Limon in 1913, the circulation of steamers, small craft, news, and remittances had bound the Eastern Caribbean islands, the Greater Antilles, and Central America's Caribbean coast into a single migratory sphere, made up of multiple and evolving regional circuits. Hundreds of thousands of British West Indians left their islands of birth to try their luck in Spanish-speaking Greater Caribbean destinations in the first third of the twentieth century. Up until World War One, their numbers were concentrated most heavily in Panama's terminal cities and Canal Zone. As sugar prices boomed in the wake of the European war, Cuban cane fields replaced Panama as the destination of choice. Meanwhile, perhaps three-fourths of Central America's banana workforce was British West Indian in the first decades of the twentieth century (the exact portion varied from district to district, and tended to decrease over time) (Marquardt 2001: 49-80; Putnam 2002: 35-75). Immigrants from the French Caribbean, South America, Western Europe, China, Syria, and India reached Caribbean Central America in this era as well, as did Spanish-speaking *mestizos* and indigenous community members from elsewhere in Central America.

In this essay I will examine the conceptualization of racial and cultural difference by North Atlantic travelers to the banana zones, on the one hand, and Caribbean denizens of the same, on the other. European and U.S. observers insisted that racial distinctions were real and self-evident. Moreover, they insisted that modern progress demanded that members of different racial categories be separated by cultural distance, social distinction, and labor market segmentation. Although individual European and American authors differed widely in their assessment of the etiology of black and brown people's inferiority, and in their degree of optimism regarding the potential for Afro-American or Native American advance, all agreed that the differential treatment of racial collectives was essential for the healthy progress of all involved. They reported events and encounters in Central America as proving the truth of this conviction. In contrast, Afro-Caribbean migrants, though they used the same racial labels to describe the social world around them, stressed economy-driven cultural change rather than race-based cultural stasis. In this section I use not only published literature, but also judicial and other sources that recorded the declarations of black sojourners "on the ground." To the extent that a common denominator emerges from these disparate sources, it is the denunciation of white hypocrisy and the disavowal of black inferiority. Skin color demanded solidarity, according to these Caribbean speakers and writers, but neither climate nor custom was destiny. They insisted that power difference rather than cultural difference determined the fate of racial collectives.

North American Fantasies of Difference and Distance

Attempting to describe "The Human Background" of Central America in 1926, Wallace Thompson was momentarily reduced to incoherence:

Race and custom and psychology throw into clear relief the history and the politics and the economics of these interesting countries.

The very race question, woven into the fabric of Central American life, is like the warp of this illuminated curtain (Thompson 1926: 238).

Not until he began to categorize and rank the collectives involved did Thompson regain his rhetorical footing. “The race factors of the basic populations, with all their degrees of combination or purity, form a most significant and varied scale [...]. From the pure Spanish peasantry of Costa Rica to the pure Indians of the Guatemalan highlands, the scale runs in complete gradations” (238). Although Central America’s “welter of mixtures” might look a mere mongrelized mass, Thompson’s trained eye discerned economic segregation and social hierarchy, and thus grounds for hope. “The workers of Central America are, everywhere, mixed-bloods and Indians, with very little social distinction to the eye of the outsider. Yet actually the lines are fully as sharply drawn in the lower ranks as higher up, and there is a pride of caste in every grade which is significant of a self-respect which bodes well for the future” (Thompson 1926: 238, 244). Meanwhile, “The Negro strain does not seriously complicate the racial problem in these countries,” due to the geographic and hence cultural separation that have so far obtained. “Until the railways and the banana companies imported Negro labourers from the West Indies, a Negro was as great a curiosity in the cities of most of Central America as a North American Indian is in London. Today the Negro belt, along with the banana belt, has been extended well into the interior, and the Negro is a familiar, although not a common, sight throughout Costa Rica and Guatemala” (242).

Although the mixed-crowd-on-the-docks vignette was a *de rigueur* set piece of Central American travel literature, Fredrick Upham Adams’s proto-multiculturalist praise of the egalitarian jostling was quite unusual. More often when those of different race and social status were thrown together—and, worst of all, when Afro-Caribbeans insisted on occupying public space with no regard for white expectations of black servility—travelers got annoyed. With an increasingly hysterical edge, U.S. traveler Harry Franck inveighed against the “impudence” and “insolence” of each crowd he encountered as he made his way across the Antilles. “The insolence of nearly all the British West Indies reaches its zenith in Kingston [...]. The town is dismal, disagreeable, and unsafe for self-respecting white women at any hour; by night it is virtually abandoned to the lawless black hordes that infest it.” Worst of all was the connivance of those black people foolishly placed in positions of authority. “[S]warms of negroes shuffle through the hot dust, cackling their silly laughter, shouting their obscenity, heckling, if not attacking the rare white men who venture abroad, love-making in perfect indifference to the proximity of other human beings, while the pompous black policemen look on without the slightest attempt to quell the disorder” (Franck 1920: 405).

Ridicule was the favorite tactic used to reassert authorial superiority and combat the anxiety that self-confident black people evidently provoked in these travelers. George Putnam described the train ride from Port Limon to the banana plantation town of Zent. “The alleged first-class coach is half of a car chiefly devoted to the transportation of darkies. There were many labourers and Jamaicans at the station and on the train, the women being particularly notable because, as they were returning from shopping visits to the metropolis of Limon, they were naturally bedecked in their newly purchased finery” (Putnam 1913: 109).

Hyatt Verrill motored north from Colón to Bocas del Toro *circa* 1918 in a made-over “coaster” that had begun life as a yacht. “Plying up and down the Isthmus from Port Limon to Colombia, carrying cargoes of cattle, pigs, coco-nuts, logwood, fruit, lumber, fish, and malodorous natives, she had accumulated as choice a collection of odours, vermin, and filth as can well be imagined.” A scene of Hobbesian chaos ensues. “Back and forth, over and under this maze of dunnage and live-stock, the sweating perfumed negresses, the odorous half-naked negroes, the rum-exuding greasy natives and their fellow-voyageurs fought, tugged, struggled, and swore in a dozen dialects as they strove to drag their individual belongings from the mass. In the dim light of the lanterns they resembled nothing so much as a pack of hyenas upon a burial-mound, and the smell wafted from them added to the illusion” (Verrill 1929: 182-184). Similarly, in 1903, Francis Nicholas traveled south from Port Limon to Puerto Viejo “in a little sloop crowded most uncomfortably with negro passengers.” Through the alchemy of racist tautology, the very stoicism of Nicholas’s fellow passengers—for whom sea travel is not an exotic adventure but unavoidably integral to working lives—is transformed into confirmation of white moral superiority. “There was scarcely standing room, but the voyage would not be long, so I forced myself to be patient. Unfortunately the wind went down, and we were a day and a night on that miserable little boat, at one time tormented by the hot sun, at another cowering under a beating tropical rain; yet the negroes were always cheerful. A negro can adapt himself to any surroundings, and be happy, provided he does not have to work” (Nicholas 1903: 141).

So common did the white-man-surrounded-by-blacks-on-a-boat vignette become among Northern travel writers, that the convention itself was parodied. Banana biologist C.W. Wardlaw traveled from Bocas del Toro to Colon aboard a “diminutive little two-decked coastal steamer [...] Passengers and crew consisted of dusky-skinned coastal Panamanians and migratory Jamaican negroes. For once I had achieved that fortuitous pinnacle of fame: I was the only white man on board! Considering the hen-coop-like berth—of which the ship boasted four—in which I slept and the other fly-blown amenities, I had reason to regard this source of self-glorification as greatly overrated” (Wardlaw 1935: 128).

The concept of race that underlay these authors’ ideas about human collectives did not rest primarily on skin color. Indeed, almost every narrative includes at least one anecdote expressly crafted to demonstrate that in these lands where “racial admixture” had so long held sway, looks could be deceiving. Rather than color, it was moral character and physical constitution that permitted travelers to diagnose the racial origins of the people they saw. That character and constitution were 1) easily visible, and 2) fundamentally hereditary, was not questioned. The different races’ adaptation to distinct climate regions was similarly an article of faith. Tropical climes caused physical lassitude and moral decay; temperate regions spurred inventive energy and self-discipline; and only the most upright of men could aspire to maintain temperate virtues under the tropical sun.

When George Palmer Putnam reached the Costa Rican Pacific port of Puntarenas in 1912, the port doctor came out to inspect the steamer’s passengers. “Before he left the small boat, we thought him a Spaniard, for his keen bronzed face would have graced any Castillian gathering [...] But once he came up the ladder, with quick, crisp movement, none but the most unobserving could set him down for anything but a transplanted son of cooler climes” (Putnam 1913: 13). Putnam’s unerring eye for moral essence, as dictated

by geographic origins and displayed by physical carriage, could not be fooled by anything so superficial as skin color. The doctor was “a Yankee of the straight New England cut” (12). Further acquaintance would confirm both the doctor’s temperate manliness and its political significance. He was “tall, straight, and spotlessly clean in person and raiment, the last characteristic alone being enough to make him notable in a latitude where cleanliness, if it truly ranks close to godliness, speaks poorly for the popularity of the latter [...] Incidentally he is boss of Puntarenas—and it may be remarked that it takes an all-round man to boss a west coast port successfully” (18).

Eager to both promote and justify the expanding U.S. presence in the Caribbean, turn-of-the-century U.S. authors used climate-based racial determinism to insist that imported black brawn and imported white brains were together essential for tropical progress. “One gets the same sort of a surprise when seeing busy Limon after weeks in lazy Central America that hits one between the eyes when first emerging from the utter, lifelong deadness of a Panamanian jungle and encountering the paroxysm of energetic efficiency that our engineers are directing at Culebra Cut, or where an army of unexamined genius is raising the vast concrete monoliths of the Gatun Locks, oblivious of the climatic and historic ‘thou shalt nots’ of the torpid environment,” wrote Putnam. “Limon, you see, is American; and the Americans there have a distressing lot to do that has to be done in a particular hurry. [...] For the world is learning to eat bananas, and the world must be supplied, just now to the tune of about 60,000,000 bunches annually, 9,000,000 of which come from Limon” (Putnam 1913: 92-93).

Frederick Palmer contrasted the industrious “Caucasian” coffee cultivators of highland Costa Rica (where “[f]or the first time in the tropics I saw a temperate zone race doing the work of peasantry”) with “the banana plantations, where the white man is inclined to hammocks and to supervising an acclimatized race” (Palmer 1910: 199, 195, 215). Banana profits demanded imperial order, it seemed: “No one would think of starting a plantation in the black republics of Haiti or Santo Domingo or in overtaxed, revolutionary, corrupt Guatemala and Nicaragua, when equally good and cheap ground could be had under British rule in Jamaica or in the orderly republic of Costa Rica” (Palmer 1910: 218). If both black labor and white rule were required, bananas could only be grown in an empire—or in republics that conveniently disenfranchised immigrant workers. Thus the conditions that made Costa Rica particularly successful as a banana producer, from Palmer’s point of view, had as much to do with race and political exclusion as they did with climate and soil sedimentation. “Sixty percent of the population of Costa Rica, probably 80 in the highlands, is pure Caucasian, or of preponderantly Caucasian strain. The negroes on the banana plantations in the lowlands are mostly foreign subjects from the West Indian Islands, who have no voice in a government centering in an oligarchy of planters” (Palmer 1910: 199; cf. 220). Far from inciting criticism, this should be cause for gratitude. The banana trust, wrote Palmer, “has fed impoverished treasuries and brought silk in place of cotton bandannas to kinky heads and lace curtains to the windows of tumbledown negro huts. For the banana man is the Jamaican black” (Palmer 1910: 219-220).

Northern travelers contrasted upright Euro-American managers with slippery Central American officials, whose illegitimacy was conveyed by the contrast between their official dress, their claims of authority and expertise, and their racial origins. “Still another customs examination by brown officialdom in blue jeans” wrote Palmer snidely of his

arrival in Colon in 1912 (Palmer 1910: 256). Although usually the ability to navigate varied social settings was presented as the hallmark of white superiority, when recent arrivals confronted corrupt local officials it was instead the *inability* to “play along” that signaled superiority. “The Englishman [...] used to orderly control of backward races, shares with the American a certain inherent stubbornness, which will not adapt itself to the system of spies, assassinations and extortion which prevails” (Palmer 1910: 234).

Meanwhile, insistence on the need for manly Euro-American management of tropical enterprises often went hand-in-hand with a rhetorical deskilling of banana labor. Unlike coffee, which “requires almost as much attention as an American Beauty rose,” for the banana “[n]o skilled labor is required. Set out a sprout and let it grow and wait for the bunch, gathered with a sweep of the *machete*, and taken in pairs on strong black shoulders to the car or boat” (Palmer 1910: 215). Black shoulders alone (no head in sight) are the necessary adjunct to the Yankee know-how that makes the plantations run. “[T]he little engines of the ‘banana railroads,’ running in and out among the plantations, sing their chuk-chuk in the still, hot air among the motionless leaves, onward to the pier, where the Jamaican yells and sings and giggles as he starts the bunches on their journey to the pushcarts and the country grocery” (Palmer 1910: 221). Afro-Caribbean stevedores with convenient muscles and childlike minds figured prominently in Frederick Upham Adams’s description of Port Limon as well. “They know that there is nothing for them to do until seven, but they come early because they love the fun and excitement. Most of them are Jamaican negroes, black as the ace of spades and care-free as the birds who sing in the adjacent park. Fat negro ‘mammies’ trudge in with handcarts loaded with food and sweetmeat delicacies dear to the negro taste [...]” (Adams 1914: 183).

Thus, black and brown people *en masse* inspired distaste or condescending amusement in the majority of Northern travelers. Yet individual “specimens” (the term is used over and over again) of black manhood frequently inspired frank admiration in the same authors. Vicious, semi-hysterical Harry Franck found the “‘husky,’ broad-shouldered negroes with their velvety black skins” to be “beautiful as mere types of the animal kingdom” (Franck 1920: 413). Meanwhile, at the other end of the ideological spectrum, Anglican Bishop Herbert Bury was making the case for black people’s intellectual capacity and moral potential—by allowing his eyes to wander in a similar search for ideal physiques. “I believe in choosing the *best* specimens when I want to sample and judge!” he assured readers, and given the assumed correspondence between physical carriage and moral development we observed above, it is perhaps not surprising to find the good bishop exceedingly attentive to the outer package of his specimen of Christian worth (Bury 1912: 201). “At a very early service one day amongst the bananas in Guatemala, when looking over the congregation at those parts of the service where one faces them, my eyes rested from time to time upon as perfect a specimen of young manhood as I have ever seen. He was kneeling straight up, a young man of about twenty-six, of such superb physique and symmetry that even his rough working clothes couldn’t conceal them” (Bury 1912: 201-202). In fact, fetishized images of the half-clothed black male form pervade turn-of-the-century travel writing about Caribbean Central America. The muscular black stevedore became an icon, a narrative pin-up, a stand-in for the region as a whole. “[T]he banana man is the Jamaican black. The picture of him with a bunch of bananas on his shoulder running up a steamer’s gangway is the one most inseparably characteristic of the Caribbean” (Palmer 1910: 219-220).

The View from the Islands

The casual racism of Euro-Americans abroad could not disguise the fact that the Caribbean sojourners they observed—sweet-sellers and stevedores alike—had made themselves right at home in Central America. This was alternately coded as “care-free” idleness, by condescending paternalists like Adams, and “unbridled insolence,” by open bigots like Harry Franck. British West Indian migrants followed economic opportunity where it emerged: a pattern not always to their employers’ liking. They built formal institutions like churches and schools, created informal social spaces in bars and on street corners, sought local allies and joined local feuds. The steamers that rounded the Caribbean carried letters, gossip, money orders, newspapers, and the occasional unaccompanied minor, in addition to the bananas below and the first-class travelers above. Most men loading bananas on Central American docks might well be “Jamaican blacks,” but most Afro-Jamaicans were not loading bananas on Central American docks. Similarly, it would be a logical fallacy to assume that United Fruit Company banana enterprise had created the British West Indian migratory world it drew on. That world was larger still than United Fruit’s “Empire in Green and Gold,” and both antedated and outlasted it.

Harlem Renaissance poet Claude McKay, who left his native Jamaica for New York City in 1912 at the age of twenty-three, knew that seeking work abroad had become Jamaican youths’ standard response to cyclical unemployment and structural exclusion. “And when there was nothing else to do they used their savings to take ship to Panama. The Panama Canal was the big hope of the poor disinherited peasant youths of Jamaica and all those islands of the Caribbean Belt that were set in the latitude of hurricanes and earthquakes—all those who did not like to sport the uniform of the army and police force. After experimenting with different kinds of labourers to do the spadework of the Canal Zone, the Yankees had found that the West Indian spades were the most reliable” (McKay 1933/1961: 293). Similarly, (white) Jamaican newspaper scion Herbert de Lisser recognized in his 1914 Bildungsroman, *Jane’s Career*, that emigration had become integral to the household economies and laboring life cycles of Jamaica’s rural masses. Jane’s family grew yams and other foodstuffs on their plot outside the village, managing to survive but not to prosper; her eldest brother was “a lad turned nineteen, who was still undecided whether he should remain at home and help his father, or emigrate to Costa Rica or Panama, there to carve out an independent career for himself” (de Lisser 1914/1971: 1).

Even as travel “to foreign” became central to Jamaican family strategies for survival and accumulation, Central American banana plantations remained a secondary destination for men and women of the islands. When migration began in earnest at the end of the nineteenth century, it was large-scale infrastructure projects like the Panama Canal that created the main opportunities that drew people off the islands, whether to labor digging ditches or laying track themselves, or to seek independent profits meeting the needs of the migrant workforces they attracted. For the generation of British West Indians who reached prime working age during canal construction, migration to Central American banana plantations was a mere footnote to migration to Panama—often a literal afterthought, an option pursued when hopes for work in Panama failed to pan out after arrival (Putnam 2002: 55–64). The primacy of Panama over all other Central American destinations was even more marked for migrants from the eastern Caribbean.

Born in British Guiana and raised in Panama by his Barbadian mother, author Eric Walrond (1898-1966) wrote short stories that encapsulate the daily travails of the “dredge-digging, Zone-building, Lord-loving peasants of the West Indies” at the height of canal construction, “herded in boxcar huts buried in the jungles of ‘Silver City’; in the murky tenements perilously poised on the narrow banks of Faulke’s River; in the low, smelting cabins of Coco Té” (Parascandola 1998: 210, 270). Male migrants’ laboring lives changed far more with the move to Panama than did those of their sisters, mothers, and wives, Walrond observed. “In the isles of their origin [the men] were the tillers of the soil—the ones to nurture cane, and water sorrel, stew coconuts and mix Maube—now theirs was a less elemental more ephemeral set of chores. Hill and vale, valley and stream gave way to wharf and drydock, dredge and machine shop. Among the women the transfiguration was less brilliant [...] The “drops” and cakes and foods and pops vended to the serfs and squatters on insular estates found a husky throated market at the ends of the pay car lines” (Parascandola 1998: 270).

For the sons and daughters of this generation, Central American banana zones’ significance as migratory destinations would be even more marginal, in comparison with the massive attraction of Cuban sugar plantations at the height of that industry’s post-war boom. In all, hundreds of thousands of British West Indians would seek work in Cuba in the two decades after World War One. The changing weight of different destinations within Jamaican migratory circuits in the interwar years can be seen in the birthplaces of foreign-born Jamaican “returnees,” that is, emigrants’ children who relocated to the island of their parents’ birth. In 1921, Jamaicans in Jamaica included 1,359 born in Panama, 591 born in Cuba, 301 born in Costa Rica, 98 born in Colombia, and 76 born elsewhere in Central America. In 1943, foreign-born Jamaicans on the island included 6,713 born in Cuba, 3,417 born in Panama, 1,410 born in the United States, 681 born in Costa Rica, and 562 born elsewhere in Central America (*Census* 1922: 52-55; Proudfoot 1950: 101, 94-96).

From the point of view of Jamaicans, by far the most important banana plantation destinations in these years were the ones on their own island. At the end of the nineteenth century a smallholder-based system of banana cultivation had brought unexpected prosperity to the island’s freehold parishes. But by the second decade of the twentieth century, Jamaica’s peasant growers faced increasing land pressure from United Fruit and others’ expanding plantations, and drew meager profits from sales of their fruit to monopoly buyers. The island’s peasant heartland sweltered under sun and drought, hunkered down under disastrous hurricanes, and bled population. This was the world from which de Lisser’s Jane hailed. “It was a decaying village this; the men had left their properties to be looked after by the girls and women, and had either gone to help dig the Panama Canal, or had migrated to such flourishing parishes as Portland and St Mary, where millions of bananas were grown, and where labour was better remunerated than in the little village where they had lived so long. Some of the women had gone away too, but the opportunities open to them were not as many or as good as those which the men found elsewhere” (de Lisser 1914/1971: 6). United Fruit and other large landholders employed increasing numbers of day laborers, men and women alike, on their extensive Jamaican plantations (Putnam 2001).

Writing in 1933, Claude McKay underlined the imperial geopolitics that had set the stage for British West Indian emigration to Central America and Cuba. Where European

and American travelers stressed how U.S. power had set the stage for the tropical investments that created labor demand, McKay focused on the role of British imperial policy—in particular, the publicly subsidized immigration of South Asian indentured workers (“coolies”) to meet the self-declared needs of Jamaica’s planter elite—in shaping labor supply. The former framing locates Caribbean workers as an inert resource mobilized at the employer’s whim (“imported Jamaicans”), whereas the latter sees them as active agents of economic development. “The Negroes in general would not work for the coolie wages. There was a steady outflow of them to the Central American jungles where their labour was indispensable to break the virgin soil for the vast banana and cocoa plantations that the Yankees were making. As workers their hides were better able to withstand the jungle fevers. And those who stayed at home worked miracles with the axe and the pick, the fork and the hoe, tilling the most difficult pieces of mountain land, bringing green growths out of stony forbidding hillside patches, eking out funds to buy the crown lands that were cut up for small proprietorship—striving and struggling against descending to the coolie level of the plantations, which to them was like a return to chattel slavery. In this they were aided by relatives, returning emigrants from Central American countries, many of whom invested their savings in small parcels of land” (McKay 1933/1961: 238-239; *cf.* Frederick 2005). Like the travelers above, McKay treats “Negroes” as a common-sense collective, and like the travelers he focuses on the fact that racially-defined groups have come to occupy different niches within the circum-Caribbean export economy. But in McKay’s rendering, Afro-Jamaicans plan their travel and target their labor in the service of meticulously protected autonomy and strategic productive investment—a far cry from the care-free, giggling toil perceived by Northern travelers.

Cultural Heterogeneity: Boundaries sometimes Breached

West Indians in turn-of-the-century Central America peopled heterogeneous communities in which group boundaries were continuously redrawn in an atmosphere marked by both mutual suspicions and cultural fluidity. The boundaries thus negotiated included those between British West Indians and “patuá” or French creole-speaking immigrants from St. Lucia, Martinique, and Guadeloupe; between worldly Jamaicans and Trinidadians and “primitive” small islanders from St. Kitts, Antigua, Montserrat; between English-speaking Jamaican immigrants whose great-great-great grandparents came from West Africa and English-speaking Jamaican immigrants whose parents came from Hindustan. There tended to be more cultural overlap and more commonality of experience among all of these groups than between them and the Spanish-speaking Central Americans they encountered. Yet this was no simple binary divide.

C.W. Wardlaw, who, as we saw above, had enough critical distance on his own position to mock some of the conventions of travel writing, was also one of the few authors to puncture the pretension of Northern observers’ ability to see, understand, and classify the humanity they encountered. “[T]he superficialities that meet the visitor’s eye, do not, after all, reflect the true life lived behind those closed jealousies. As one glances up to the balconies or down the numerous dark and narrow lanes, one has a sense of tumultuous native life, a colorful existence painted in black and white, yellow and brown, and the

inevitable intermediate shades, with appropriate smells to match. There is the real life of those mixed communities. It is, alas, one that the wayfarer can seldom see or appreciate in a brief sojourn” (Wardlaw 1935: 135).

Judicial cases from Panama City, Colón, Bocas del Toro, and Port Limon at the turn of the century capture individuals born in Costa Rica, Panama, Nicaragua, and Colombia (in each case, some with Anglo names and some Hispanic, some labeled white and some identified as black); men and women from Mexico, Ecuador, and Peru; Yankee sailors including *norteamericanos*, *negros americanos*, and *filipinos*; Spaniards, Italians, and Eastern European Jews; and nationals of every British, Dutch, and French possession in the Caribbean. Somehow they all managed to understand each other well enough to buy and to sell, to insult and to take offense, and occasionally to fall in love. One Waldron story begins with a young *mestiza* woman, “her skin the ripe red gold of the Honduran half breed,” shocking the West Indian dockworkers who are jostling to carry her luggage by scolding them in flawless Jamaican: “Wha’ yo’ ah try fi’ do, leggo” (Parascandola 1998: 199). Like her, sizeable numbers of Guatemalan women in Puerto Barrios married or entered consensual unions with Afro-Caribbean or Afro-North American husbands, sometimes learning English, sometimes integrating their husbands into their Spanish-speaking *ladino* communities (Opie 1999: 128-134). Bajan-inflected creole is the lingua franca of the teeming Colón tenement portrayed in Waldron’s “Tropic Death.” A servant the narrator calls “the Cholo girl” (that is, a Spanish-speaking peasant of indigenous ancestry) yells downstairs for the pipes to be opened: “Giv’ me wattah, yo’ dam China-mang, you giv’ me de wattah” (Parascandola 1998: 264). The Colombian woman who owns the building also speaks the language of her tenants—yet insists on marking the racial distance she perceives. “Me white,” she’d say to the West Indian lodgers on her tenement, “you no see fo’ my skin?” The narrator, however, is not convinced. When wind or heat wore away the “starch-like powder” she wore, we are told, “Madame’s neck, or the rim of Madame’s mouth, or the balloons under Madame’s eyes—would expose a skin as yellow as the breasts of the Cholo girl” (Parascandola 1998: 264).

Resentment of the “dam China-mang” and his fellow Asian immigrants was widespread, and widely shared across immigrant groups. When Jane Cummings tried to push past a group of young men watching a horse-carousel in Port Limon in 1899, Peter Smith (Jamaican, like her) called out that she had left her former lover for a Chinese man, that she was “a chinaman’s whore and that he’d kick her in the ass,” to which she replied “that if he wanted to kick her (ass) that here it was, go ahead.” To this he replied, according to his own testimony, “that yes, that I would because she lived with a *chino* and that for that reason any ordinary Jamaican could live with her.”¹ Even this anecdote, about the role of boastful masculinity in the reassertion of group boundaries, informs us that those bounds could be crossed.

We know something more about the relationship between eighteen-year-old Jamaican Theresa Green and Chinese immigrant Po Wo An who courted her in 1915. When Theresa became pregnant, Po Wo An’s older relatives pressured him to break off their relationship. He wrote to her:

¹ Archivo Nacional de Costa Rica, Limón Alcaldía Única 422 (injurias, 1899). Parentheses in original. This is my translation of the court reporter’s Spanish translation of the original Jamaican English.

Limon CR

9 Oct 1915

Dear friend Miss

I am know you get to sick now let me sorry very much because I have not time go to see you as soon as I see you to by and by. I am very love you and want marry to you but is time very bad and my business every day very dull I cant manage marry to do so please you must go to look next gentleman and marry to you you must Dont vex and excuse me

I am yours Dear friends Domio Po Wo An

Countless daily conversations are testified to by Po Wo An's profoundly Jamaican English—"you must Dont vex"—; the couple married, at her mother's insistence, the following day.²

By emphasizing the heterogeneity of this world, I do not mean to deemphasize the hierarchies and violence that marked it. These were underlined by a day of bloodshed that shook Limon—and then was immediately silenced. In 1902, on market day in Matina (a town at the core of the banana plantation zone then in its heyday), a Spanish-speaking Costa Rican worker mocked Jamaican vendor Richard Green and kicked over his stack of corncobs. Green pulled a knife. When local policemen set upon Green with their nightsticks he ran. A short time later Green reappeared rifle in hand, and shot seven white people in Matina center. He also killed two of the party of armed Costa Ricans who set out after him, before being gunned down himself. The *agente fiscal* (state's attorney) assigned to the subsequent investigation appended this note to his account of Green's death. "Furthermore: I was at the scene of events a few moments after the occurrence; I saw three men laid out in the dirt with their chests ripped open by the lethal lead and six more people, including one woman, gravely injured by Green, who had the whole region in terror because he had sworn to kill every white he found. It is in the interests of Costa Rica and of the justice system in particular for this investigation to be concluded and filed as quickly as possible."³

That surreptitious filing away of the possibility of radically oppositional blackness typifies Central American states' stance toward the potential racial politics of West Indian immigration in this early era. Transnational employers like the United Fruit Company had come to depend on the circum-Caribbean labor supply just as West Indian household economies had come to depend on circum-Caribbean labor demand. National politicians, themselves dependent on those transnational employers in ways licit and non-, downplayed the long-term significance of black migrants' presence. The documentary record of this era abounds in evidence of power wielded by state agents against immigrants, yet it is a matter of *ad hoc* abuses not drastically different from those experienced by other poor working folks, rather than public attempts at categorical exclusion. (This situation would be transformed in the 1920s, as xenophobic anti-black migration restrictions were put in place by state after state in the Spanish-speaking Greater Caribbean, truncating the migratory circuits and social support networks that had sustained three generations of Caribbean families [Putnam 2005].)

² Archivo Nacional de Costa Rica, Limón Juzgado del Crimen (estupro, 1915). I am grateful to Moji Anderson for calling my attention to the Jamaican elements of Po Wo An's letter.

³ Archivo Nacional de Costa Rica, Limón Juzgado del Crimen 217 (homicidio, 1902). "Conviene a Costa Rica y a la justicia en particular que estos procesos se archiven pronto."

Local West Indians called to testify in the above case rushed to assure questioners that Richard Green was an evil and exceptional man—as surely he was. But in treating individual abuses as skirmishes in an ongoing struggle in which skin color determined allegiance, he acted on an understanding of group boundaries shaped by the daily struggles and collective conflagrations of Jamaican history. Many arriving Afro-Caribbeans shared the common sense assumption that they were black, that the Yankees or local “Spanish” they now worked for were white, that when push came to shove it would come down to skin for skin.⁴ On the other hand, those arriving Afro-Caribbeans who had been “brown,” “red,” or “coloured” on their islands of origins found themselves comfortably “white” in some Central American social circles, resentfully “black” in others (most particularly, in the eyes of Yankee bosses in the Canal Zone or on UFCo plantations). The re-grouping was all the more drastic for those who headed farther north: “On coming to the United States, the West Indian [...] is bewildered—that is, if he is not ‘clear’ enough to pass as a Greek or Spaniard or Italian—at being shoved down certain blocks and alleys ‘among his own people,’” wrote Walrond (Parascandola 1998: 146). Migrants experienced a multitude of racial systems over the course of their traveling lives. Little wonder they viewed with skepticism the claim that any given system of racial hierarchy reflected a “natural” order.

Conclusion

Caribbean writers and witnesses, participants in the migratory system that linked islands to Central American ports and plantations in the early twentieth century, took the salience of race for granted. If anything, they placed more emphasis on the social significance of skin color gradations than did the Northern travelers who visited the region in the same years. Yet they also recognized the cultural fluidity of the region, the ways in which migrants of different origins, languages, and appearances learned from each other, intentionally or not, whether they liked it or not. And again and again, they emphasized the role of differential economic and political power in driving collective destinies. In contrast, European and American travelers to Central America relied on the clustered concepts of climate, character, and culture to explain success and failure, progress and misery, at the collective as well as individual level. Their racialized perceptions created convenient tautologies that mandated a tutelary role for Europeans and Americans in guiding and disciplining the ignorant black and brown masses they thought they saw. What the objects of that gaze saw was something else entirely, as their oral and written testimony makes clear.

⁴ A generation before, Baptist deacon Paul Bogle had called hard-pressed peasant farmers to arms in these terms: “It is now time for us to help ourselves—skin for skin. The iron bar is now broken in this parish... War is at us, my black skin.” Quoted in Holt (1992: 262).

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