

Amherst College

# West Indian women in the Panama Canal Zone, 1904-1914

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To my mom and dad, who brought me where I am today.

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## **Introduction**

*“And so we worked together—men and women, black and white—all intent on the successful completion of the Canal.”<sup>1</sup>*

In her patriotic retelling of her experience in the Canal, the “Panama Canal Bride” Elizabeth Parker conjures an image of different people coming together to fulfill the most important engineering project in American history. People of diverse backgrounds converged in the Canal Zone, creating a multi-national, multi-ethnic society that would transform Panama and the world. In reconstructing Canal history, however, scholars have focused on American masculine imperialist narratives while generally ignoring the role of blacks and women. Black women, their jobs and lives, are central to my project. Men, black and white, built the Canal. White women served as a civilizing force for the white workers, their domestic work parallel to their husbands' labor. Due to their complex position at the intersection of race, gender and class, black women disappear from the accounts. Their domesticity is made inferior to that of the white woman, their informal labor less significant than the black man's contribution to the Canal. A closer look at some ignored primary sources from the Canal construction period shows that black West Indian women were everywhere—they cleaned houses, sold food and goods, washed laundry, married, had children, nursed the sick, taught students. Yet in the academic literature about the Canal, dominated by American historians, they are nowhere to be found. In the reconstruction of the story of the Canal, white and black men are situated as laborers and white women are situated in the home, but West Indian women have no place. The story of their experience, generally considered less important and less visible than that of others, helps reclaim the Canal space as part of the history of the Black

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Parker, *Panama Canal Bride: A Story of Construction Days* (New York: Exposition, 1955), 43.

diaspora.

This thesis analyzes the interactions between West Indian women, the American governing institutions and the other residents of Panama during the early chaotic years of the construction of the Panama Canal, from 1904 to 1914. What were these women's lives like? What is the significance of black women's history to the story of the Panama Canal?

## **Historical Background**

We must first explore the history of the Canal that has been written to find the gaps where women's history resides. In 1838 Great Britain formally abolished slavery and declared emancipation for all its colonies, drastically transforming West Indian society and economy. Emancipated slaves escaped the oppressive plantation system by sharecropping or moving towards urban centers, but the remaining British interests limited the development of a self-sufficient peasantry and a steady decline in sugar prices after 1874 quickly decimated job prospects in the sugar producing islands.<sup>2</sup> Many West Indians migrated across the Caribbean Sea in search of better employment opportunities in Central and South America. The West Indian experience in Panama allows us to examine in microcosm the larger forces that expanded the black diaspora during the twentieth-century, where black subjects scattered across the globe in response to the forces of racism, economic exploitation, imperialism and capitalist trade.

Even before emancipation, Panama's strategic position on the Isthmus connecting North and South America meant it was an important trade route which boasted a small population of African descent. Beginning in the 1820s, groups of black workers traveled

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<sup>2</sup> Velma Newton, *The Silver Men: West Indian Labour Migration to Panama, 1850-1914* (Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle, 2004), 26, Table 1: "Prices of Sugar Exports from Jamaica to the United Kingdom, 1846, 1914," 9.

from the Caribbean to work on various construction projects in Northern Panama. This trickle held steady through the nineteenth century to support the construction of the Panama Railway, a project funded by American businessman W.H. Aspinwall to augment trade from the California Gold Rush.<sup>3</sup> It was not until France attempted to build a canal in Panama in the late nineteenth century that the Isthmus became a major destination in the black Caribbean diaspora. From around 1879 to 1890, as many as 50,000 black West Indian documented workers arrived in Panama to work for France under Head Engineer Marie Ferdinand de Lessepes on the first attempt to build a canal connecting the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean. After the project failed, some West Indians were repatriated, but many stayed and formed communities around Colon.

Before 1903, Panama was a province of the Republic of Colombia. In 1902, the U.S. Congress authorized President Theodore Roosevelt to acquire land from the Colombian government to build an inter-oceanic canal in the strategic position of Panama. One year later, the Republic of Panama, assisted by the US, declared its independence from Colombia. Two weeks later, Phillippe Bunau-Varilla, a French engineer standing as representative of Panama, negotiated the future site of the Canal with Secretary of State John Hay and the U.S. Congress. Without the participation of any Panamanians, the Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty was signed, granting sovereignty to the US over a ten-mile-wide strip of land along the canal, from Panama City and the Bay of Panama to Colón and the Caribbean Sea.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Senator Anthony S. Johnson, “The Jamaica-Panama Connection,” *West Indian Participation in the Construction of the Panama Canal*, Publication of the Proceedings of Symposium held at the University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica. June 15-17, 2000 (Kingston, Jamaica: Latin American Caribbean Center, University of the West Indies, 2000), 7.

<sup>4</sup> This is quite the story, though beyond the scope of this thesis. See John Major, “Part I: Prelude,” in *Prize Possession: The United States and the Panama Canal, 1903-1979* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

The US began construction on the second canal project in 1903 but even before the work began, William Crawford Gorgas, army doctor and veteran of the sanitation effort in Cuba, led West Indian workers in combating the threat of malaria and yellow fever in Panama through extensive fumigation, grass cutting, sewer construction, and street paving.<sup>5</sup> From 1903 to 1908, the Canal Zone was administered by the Isthmian Canal Commission. In 1908, Roosevelt appointed Colonel George Goethals to lead the Commission, and most describe his administration as one of “benevolent despotism.” As an engineer, his priority was building the canal but to him, the greatest challenge was “the necessity of ruling and preserving order within the Canal Zone.”<sup>6</sup>

The second and largest migration of Caribbean blacks to Panama occurred during the construction of the Canal. During the decade of construction, over three-quarters of the workforce came from the British West Indies, a tidal wave of immigration. During the early years, recruiters would pay local agents in the islands a premium for each male laborer delivered to the docks. Recruits underwent a physical inspection and, if approved, were sent on to Panama.<sup>7</sup> Initially, most recruits signed contracts that included their transportation costs but canal officials soon began to encourage independent workers to find their own passage. Officially, about 31,000 West Indian men and women migrated to Panama. Unofficially, the number neared 150,000 and may have reached 200,000 people.<sup>8</sup> West Indian women had few Canal job prospects, so most of them were not contracted. They paid their own passage and looked for unofficial employment in

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<sup>5</sup> Ira E. Bennet, *History of the Panam Canal: Its Construction and Builders* (Washington, D.C.: Historical Publishing Company, 1915), 122.

<sup>6</sup> George Washington Goethals, *Government of the Canal Zone* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1915), 8.

<sup>7</sup> Newton, 43.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Conniff, *Black Labor on a White Canal* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, 1985), 29.

construction camps and large towns.<sup>9</sup> Estimates of the female West Indian population in Panama are always rough, since they are based on Canal Records that often did not authenticate their labor or presence. However, the 1912 Zone Census shows that more than six thousand West Indian women lived inside the territory of the Canal Zone, while many more lived in the congested West Indian neighborhoods of Colon and Panama City.<sup>10</sup>

In order to mitigate labor instability and improve productivity and worker morale among white American workers, the U.S. Government encouraged white American women to come to Panama to provide a stable home and three meals a day for their working husbands. However, although West Indian men working in the Canal Zone faced similar domestic challenges, the ICC did not view the arrival of West Indian women as positively as it did that of white women. In 1905, for example, when the U.S. Government organized the transport of several hundred Martiniquean women to Panama, President Roosevelt ordered an inquiry into their morality, to gauge whether they had been brought to work as prostitutes.<sup>11</sup> Even without official encouragement, black women traveled to and settled in Panama, forming an integral part of Canal society.

## Literature Review

Most scholars have approached the story of the Canal Zone through a focus on imperial or labor history, privileging the work of men or the imperialist objective, even that of white women. This angle neglects black women, who rarely appear in the official

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 29.

<sup>10</sup> Julie Greene, *The Canal Builders: Making America's Empire at the Panama Canal* (New York: Penguin Group, 2009), 256.

<sup>11</sup> Greene, 258.

documentation that most historians have relied upon through the years. Black women fit into both of these types of histories of the Canal—they were economic agents and imperialist subjects. Their story also illuminates the rarely studied cultural and social aspect of the early years of Canal construction. It connects the Canal Zone to the history of Panama, the African diaspora and black women, rather than treating it solely as a discrete moment in American imperial history.

The earliest accounts of the history of the Canal explore its relationship to US imperialism. These books focus on the big players—Theodore Roosevelt, George Goethals and William Gorgas—and they celebrate the work they did in creating the Canal.<sup>12</sup> The most popular account remains David McCullough's The Path Between the Seas (1977), which continues to serve as a model for scholarship on the Canal.<sup>13</sup> McCullough divides his book into three sections, whose titles—“The Vision,” “Stars and Stripes Forever,” and “The Builders”—reflect his patriotic and glorified American focus. He presents the Canal construction as both a “profoundly important historic event and a sweeping human drama,” arguing that the experience of the participants is key to understanding the whole story: “I wanted to see these people for what they were, as living, fallible, often highly courageous men and women caught up in a common struggle far bigger than themselves.”<sup>14</sup> But for him, “these people” are the white American men who controlled the construction. The section on “The Builders” discusses white workers but it revolves around Gorgas, Stevens and Goethals as larger-than-life figures. The book presumes to describe “the builders” but devotes only five pages (one percent of the book)

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<sup>12</sup> Roosevelt—U.S. President at the time, Goethals—Head Engineer, Gorgas—Head of Sanitation.

<sup>13</sup> David G. McCullough, *The Path between the Seas: the creation of the Panama Canal, 1870-1914* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1977).

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 11-12.

to West Indian men, who composed more than half of the workforce. Women do not figure at all in the story McCullough tells.

As recently as 2007, Matthew Parker's Panama Fever extended the paradigm laid out in McCullough's study. His section titles, "The Golden Isthmus," "The French Tragedy," and "The American Triumph," reflect a similar sentiment to McCullough; that the history of the Canal is the story of American success.<sup>15</sup> Parker glorifies the Canal as a magnificent feat of engineering that brought the world together and represents Panama as an impenetrable, wild jungle tamed by American energy and ingenuity. Panama Fever does depart from McCullough's model in certain respects. It reflects more critically on the role of American imperialism and gives a bigger role to West Indian male workers, whom Parker acknowledges at the outset of his story. Parker also deviates from the traditional labor-focused history by providing a short section on West Indian cultural activities such as church, burial clubs and Saturday night bar visits, but he exoticizes their difference, describing "the Caribbean people" as "the unquestioned leaders of glamour and glitter."<sup>16</sup>

The 1980's brought a wave of scholarship focusing on West Indian male labor migration to Panama. Michael Conniff's Black Labor on a White Canal (1985) and Velma Newton's The Silver Men (1984) are the two most important works on the subject. The value of their work lies in their reinterpretation of the sources commonly used by American historians of Panama, such as newspapers and the Isthmian Canal Commission Reports, to describe the lives of West Indian men. Conniff's book deals with the collision of different cultures in the Panama Canal. He argues that West Indian men traveled to

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<sup>15</sup> Matthew Parker, *Panama Fever: The Epic Story of One of the Greatest Human Achievements of all Time—the Building of the Panama Canal* (New York: Doubleday, 2007).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 434.

Panama to work on the Canal, but their attachment to their work and the racist system of American segregation impeded their adjustment to Panamanian society. Conniff also claims that, in the years after canal construction, West Indians created a unique “West Indian subculture” in response to Panamanian chauvinism that combined British, Caribbean, North American and Panamanian traditions. Though he provides a lot of information on the conditions of West Indian communities, Conniff devotes only a single paragraph to black women.

Newton's The Silver Men is one of the key works about the Panama Canal and the Caribbean diaspora. Newton constructs a comprehensive narrative of West Indian male laborers' migration to Panama, beginning with their West Indian background, and exploring their motivations, the emigration policies of the islands, the process of recruitment and the character of the actual migration. Her sources are varied and original, including newspaper ads for jobs, contracts, and cargo lists. Newton is from the Caribbean herself, and works as an Acquisitions Librarian at the University of West Indies. She is the only historian who also delves into more personal reasons for migration rather than the purely economic rationale most scholars assume, such as the desire of some workers to rid themselves of the stigma of plantation labor, the desire for adventure, and the effect of peer pressure. A large theme of her story is migration—what the motivations are, how it happens and how it came to be so integral to the Caribbean experience. Newton discusses her theory of migration as a composite of economic and demographic terms of the areas of origin and destination (the “push-pull” hypothesis) and individual behavior and perception.<sup>17</sup> She also deals seriously with the different economic, political and social effects this massive migration had on the West Indian

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<sup>17</sup> Newton, 4-7.

nations, showing the responses of West Indian governments and journalists of the time. Nevertheless, like others before her, Newton also ignores black women's experiences.

In the twenty-first century, scholars have pursued a new focus in the study of the Panama Canal that includes such underrepresented groups as women and other foreign laborers from Spain and Eastern Europe. The first work to focus solely on women in the Panama Canal was Paul Woodrow Morgan's 2000 Florida State University PhD Thesis, "The role of North American women in U.S. Cultural chauvinism in the Panama Canal Zone, 1904-1945."<sup>18</sup> Morgan argues that white American women were a key part of "importing, cultivating and propagating middle-class values and customs" to the Canal Zone.<sup>19</sup> He focuses on these women's relationship with the people of Panama, particularly Panamanian elites, and how their action "[laid] cultural roots for Panamanian resentment of U.S. Zone residents."<sup>20</sup> Morgan's thesis is significant because it focuses on women, but it relies heavily on common stereotypes of femininity. He basically argues that white women's only contribution was their domesticity, which served the goals of imperialism. Moreover, Morgan, too, overlooks the significance of white women's interactions with the black women who worked as their domestics and laundresses and helped them navigate an unfamiliar natural environment.

The only work that features West Indian women extensively is Panamanian historian Eyra Marcela Reyes Rivas' El trabajo de las mujeres en la historia de la construccion del Canal de Panama (2000). The work discusses different groups of women in the Canal—white American, French, West Indian, Spanish—arguing that the Canal

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<sup>18</sup> Paul W. Morgan, *The Role of North American women in U.S. Cultural Chauvinism in the Panama Canal Zone, 1904-1945* (Ph.D. Dissertation), Florida State University, 2000.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, vii.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, viii.

area was a “frontier zone” where women were able to move from patriarchal subjugation in the private sphere into more independent roles in the public sphere. Rivas concedes that many black women did not necessarily follow this trajectory, since much of their work was already in the public sphere. She attempts to rescue the “invisible lives” of women on the silver roll (predominantly West Indian, but also Spanish and Panamanian) by searching through the scant information available in the Canal Record. One of the book's strengths is the display of the variety of jobs that women held in the Zone during this period. Previous works mentioned domestic servitude, but Reyes Rivas lists informal vendors, washerwomen, prostitution, and teaching, noting that most women's work “developed in the informal sector of the economy.”<sup>21</sup> But her short section on West Indian women almost exclusively focuses on their labor and neglects their motivations or personal stories.

The only historian who deals explicitly with West Indian women and considers the intersection of gender, race and imperialism in the history of the Panama Canal is Julie Greene. In The Canal Builders (2009), Greene writes a revisionist “bottom-up” labor history of the Panama Canal, focusing equally on the social dimension—Who were these people? How did they live? Her first four chapters are divided into different labor sectors: White American men, West Indian men, Women and European men. The Canal Zone, she argues, was a place where many systems and cultures came together and the US government tried to control these tensions by creating strict boundaries—between blacks and whites, men and women, Americans and foreigners. Her chapter on women includes a short section on West Indian women and her argument there is the same as for

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<sup>21</sup> Eyla Marcela Reyes Rivas, *El Trabajo de la Mujeres en la Construcción del Canal de Panamá, 1881-1914* (Panama: Universidad de Panamá, Instituto de la Mujer, 2000), 144. My own translation.

black men—“geographical and occupational mobility provided one of the most effective tools for creating independence for themselves in the regimented and industrialized Canal Zone.”<sup>22</sup> Greene brings a new focus to the tired arguments on the Panama Canal. However, the book still reaches for the same goal of previous works—to present a portrait of U.S. Imperialism, to tease out what the Canal project meant for America.

Greene's work does, however, draw on new primary sources which have been crucial for my project. Greene cites a small number of legal cases that reveal details of black women's lives ignored elsewhere in the literature. The legal records of the Zone Courts currently languish in disarray in the U.S. National Archives in Washington D.C., even though they hold rich material on Zone residents and a large number of cases including West Indian women.<sup>23</sup> For a scholar of black women's history, the cases are a goldmine, since they include first person (though court edited) narrative. Civil cases show black women petitioning for divorce and protecting their business interests. Such cases help us recreate the stories of West Indian women, and their search for work, opportunity and independence through the Caribbean diaspora, as well as the obstacles they encountered.

## Sources and Methodology

These legal records of the Canal Zone District Courts have become a primary source for my study. Another primary source is the U.S. Senate Investigation on Panama Canal Matters, which contains more than 150 affidavits with testimony from Martiniquan immigrant women, describing their living and working conditions. I have supplemented

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 124.

<sup>23</sup> See Appendix A on the organization of legal records.

these with accounts from white American women like Rose Van Hardeveld and Elizabeth Parker, who interacted with their West Indian domestic servants and who wrote memoirs about their Panama experience.

On June 16<sup>t</sup>, 1904, Panama ceased all its judicial functions in the area. Two months later, on August 16<sup>th</sup>, the U.S. authorized the creation of a Judiciary.<sup>24</sup> The government established three circuit courts in the Canal Zone, with the judges who presided over each circuit serving also on the Canal Zone Supreme Court. The circuits covered three large areas from an urban center: Balboa (1<sup>st</sup> Circuit), Empire, Gorgona and Ancon (2<sup>nd</sup> Circuit) and Cristobal (3<sup>rd</sup> Circuit). The courts, however, were not a separate branch of government in the Zone, nor did they have power of legislative review. The judicial and prison systems in the Zone were constructed to play the critical role of maximizing the productivity of Canal Zone residents while maintaining social and moral order.<sup>25</sup> The Zone courts were thus not constitutional, but merely legislative.<sup>26</sup> In his exploration of the legal history of the Canal, Wayne Bray argues that the courts of the Canal Zone functioned under U.S. Common Law, a system based on the accumulation of precedent. This precedent reflected the mix of influences in the area—in court, people called upon US law, Colombian, Panamanian and Hispanic law. Some West Indians even called upon British law through the British diplomatic representatives serving in Panama. The general disorder regarding law in the Canal Zone gave West Indian women a space to carve out more independence or authority through legal means.

The history of the Canal has been written mostly through the primary accounts in

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<sup>24</sup> Wayne D. Bray, *The Common Law Zone in Panama: A Case Study in Reception* (San Juan, Puerto Rico: Inter American University Press, 1977), 76.

<sup>25</sup> Conniff, 37.

<sup>26</sup> Bray, 73.

the Isthmian Canal Commission Reports and these reports almost never speak of black women. This makes the court cases one of the few government primary sources from the Panama Canal that feature West Indian women. Since very few criminal cases involved West Indian women, all the cases I have used in my study come from Civil Courts working during the first decade of the American canal construction, from 1904 to 1914. The most common kind of case involving West Indian women was divorce cases. Along with these, there are a number of insanity cases in the Third Circuit Court, and several debt cases related to a black female resident of Colon, Jane Hall. The cases expand our understanding of the role of women in the history of the Canal, showing them as active participants in public and legal culture and as members of a variety of classes and backgrounds. Unfortunately, some of the case files are very incomplete. Many cases, such as the insanity ones, went through probate courts before ending up in the civil court, so the files are divided. The National Archives owns a complete, albeit disorganized, collection of the probate, magistrate and appeals courts records that I was unable to read but which I am certain would have expanded my analysis. As with many of the other sources available in the Canal Zone, the cases leave a gap as to West Indian women's own thoughts and the details of their everyday life. Though much information can be deduced from the cases, the sources are still an edited "official" version of history from the American perspective.

The previously mentioned Senate Investigation on the Martiniquean women is one of the most interesting sources about West Indian women in the Canal and is more fully explored in the second chapter. In 1906, the journalist Poultny Bigelow wrote an article blaming the US government for prostitution trafficking. The fear of adverse public

opinion drove the US Senate to investigate the lives of the newly arrived immigrant women. The Investigation includes affidavits that, though edited for content by investigators, contain some of the only words recorded directly from West Indian women. The Investigation provides information on women's living and working conditions, their experience of migration, and their relationship with the state. It also provides invaluable information about West Indian religious life and its interaction with American religious institutions. But the Investigation focuses on a small group of women who were actively recruited by the Commission. Though it provides an interesting case study, the experience of these women is likely dissimilar in many aspects from that of most other West Indian female immigrants to the Canal.

Official records thus cannot disclose the full story. Many women probably resorted to extra-legal means to deal with their problems, possibly distrustful of the US system or cognizant of more direct solutions. And though West Indian women show up in numerous cases, they do so considerably less than men, in part due to the Court's labor focus. To extend the information from the court cases and the investigation, I have analyzed several primary traveler accounts and memoirs from white American women. In the literature about the Canal, the memoirs of Americans Elizabeth Parker and Rose Van Hardeveld are often cited, yet they are never read for the stories of black women they include, even though the authors speak at length about their relationships with their West Indian maids and the activities of West Indian women in the towns where they lived. Although these memoirs focus on the American experience, they provide valuable insights into the personal relationships that West Indian working women had with their bosses. Though the courts rarely speak of black women's labor, the memoirs contradict

this silence, as black women there are constantly working in the background.

A third memoir, Maid in Panama, published in 1938, has not received attention from any scholar even though it is a valuable and peculiar resource on West Indian life in Panama. Canal Zone resident Sue Core compiled “informal stories” about West Indians in the Panama Canal with the purpose of creating a picture of employer-worker relationships between whites and West Indians in the Zone. She assures the reader that all the stories are “actual happening[s] from an experience related by friends and neighbors who make up the American personnel of the Isthmus.” More than half the stories concern West Indian women in service industries such as maids, laundresses and fruit merchants.

The largest gap in the sources is the cultural life of West Indians. Previous literature has reduced the multidimensional space of the Canal to merely economic relationships. In order to fill this gap, I have incorporated pictures, poems and songs gathered from West Indian communities in the Canal. Claude McKay's poems, Eric Walrond's short stories from *Tropic Death*, work songs from West Indian laborers gathered by anthropologist Louise Cramer, and photographs from contemporary travelers expand the history of the Canal, developing a more vivid image of everyday life and social interaction. The lack of documented cultural production by West Indian women from the period requires us to read carefully between the lines of West Indian culture or male work culture to find details about the particularities of women's lives.

Through these sources, I will tell stories of West Indian women in the Canal, reconstructing different aspects of their lives. Chapter 1 of this thesis provides an overview of West Indian life in the Canal Zone during this period. In it, I discuss the motivations and experience of migration, the living conditions in West Indian

communities and the diverse cultures that intersected in the Canal Zone. The chapter argues that West Indian women were driven to the Canal for economic reasons in many of the same ways men were, but that other motivations also influenced their decision. Though the focus is on West Indian women, the sources for this chapter often deal only indirectly with their experience. Most of the statistical work on the Canal Zone populations, for example, focuses on Commission laborers. Nevertheless, I attempt to analyze the sources that speak generally about West Indians to imagine the experiences of a woman. Chapter 2 discusses women's labor. In it, I categorize and describe the different types of work West Indian women performed, showing the variety of jobs that were essential to the running of Canal society such as domestic servants, laundresses, and vendors. I focus a good deal of attention on Jane Hall, a boarding house keeper in Colon, to problematize the common image of West Indian female labor, public visibility and class. The chapter also explores the tension between surveillance and freedom in the workplace, examining the different degrees of authority and agency black women sought and gained in their various jobs. Chapter 3 analyzes civil cases concerning family life, that is, divorce and insanity cases. It shows how women negotiated the expectations of femininity set by the courts and their family members. The chapters interpret previously overlooked primary sources, hoping to recreate a part of the Canal experience that has been sorely overlooked.

This study of the role of women in the Canal Zone extends, enriches and also contradicts historians' assumptions about the lives of West Indians in the Canal Zone. Black women's interactions with white Americans were qualitatively different from those of black men, given that they were less segregated in their movements and more likely to

interact with whites on a personal level as independent contractors or domestics. Understanding the history of black women in the Canal Zone through the court cases illuminates how women used the opportunities that the new Panama society presented them to extend entrepreneurial and economic opportunities and civil liberties. It also shows how the diasporic move black women decided to make could lead to a high degree of freedom.

The Panama Canal Zone, in the early years of the construction project, can best be conceived as a “contact zone” for the purposes of this study. The Panama Canal was what theorist Mary Louise Pratt would describe as a “space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality and intractable conflict.”<sup>27</sup> Pratt's work influences my reading of the primary sources, in an attempt to de-emphasize the American authors of the memoirs, court files and Senate investigation as the exclusive source of knowledge on the Canal space. More importantly, it helps to see the relationships between West Indian women and other residents of the Canal not in terms of oppressor-victim, but in terms of “copresence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices,” even within highly disparate power balances.<sup>28</sup> This focus will allow us to begin to imagine the Canal Zone as a multidimensional space, and the black women in it as fully realized participants in the relationships formed there.

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<sup>27</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1992), 6.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 7.

## Chapter 1

“We hea' a callin' from Colon”: Migrating to the Canal Zone

*We hea' a callin' from Colon  
We hea' a callin' from Limon,  
Let's quit de t'ankless toil an' fret  
fe where a better pay we'll get.*

*Though ober deh de law is bad,  
an' dey no know de name o' God,  
Yet dere is nuff work fe we han's,  
Reward in gol'fe beat de ban's.*

*De freedom here we'll maybe miss,  
Our ol' rum an our Joanie's kiss,  
De Prattlin' of our little Nell,  
De chimin' o' de village bell,*

*De John-t'-whits in de mambee tree,  
An' all de sights we lub fe see;  
All dis, I know, we must exchange  
For t'ings dat will seem bad an' strange.*

*We'll have de beastly 'panish beer,  
De never-ceasin' wear an' tear,  
All Sundays wuk in coca-walk,  
An' trying fe larn de country's talk;*

*A-meetin' mountain cow an' cat,  
An' Goffs wi plunder awful fat,  
While choppin' do'n de ru'nate wood,  
Malaria suckin' out we blood.*

*But poo'ness deh could neber come,  
And dere'll be cash fe sen' back home  
Fe de old heads, de bastard babe,  
An' something ober still fe sabe.*

—Claude McKay<sup>1</sup>

In the decade of the construction of the Panama Canal, thousands of black women

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<sup>1</sup> Winston James, *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia* (London: Verso, 1998), 27.

heard a “call from Colon.” Jamaican Claude McKay’s 1912 poem eloquently evokes the complexities of this migration to Panama. Many West Indians were aware that in Panama, “de law is bad”, malaria was rampant, and the “wear an’ tear” of hard labor was never-ending. Yet, the speaker is willing to give up freedom and rum, all the sights they love and even Joanie’s kiss, for the economic opportunities of Panama. His resolve suggests that, for all its beauty, life in Jamaica is hard, the work is thankless and the pay insufficient to support a family. Though the speaker represented in this poem is male, some of the concerns McKay’s poems express—a desire for economic opportunity, a nostalgia for the familiarity of home—know no gender. Men and women from the West Indies both heard this call, telling them of the better pay and the opportunity to support their family and save money. But while women’s experiences learning about Panama, traveling and finding a home there have some similarity to men’s experiences, they also differ in significant ways. This chapter explores the changes black women experienced moving to a highly industrialized and predominantly male society.

Historians have thus far ignored black women’s role in the story of migration to Panama and left unexplored the few sources on the subject. The common portrayal of women’s motivations is that they followed their husbands. However, a closer look at the available sources shows that women were independent agents of migration. They migrated for many diverse reasons—for better jobs and pay, for love, for more freedom. Their stories expand the image of the Canal as more than just a labor camp or a political venture by the U.S. Through the stories of these women, the Canal Zone emerges as a complex society, where many people and nations came into contact and were affected by new cultural interactions.

Black women came to Panama from Jamaica, Barbados, Martinique, St. Lucia, Trinidad and other Caribbean islands, migrating in waves during the construction of the American Canal in the early years of the Twentieth-century. The number of West Indian women who traveled to Panama is uncertain. The 1912 U.S. census lists the following population statistics:

1912 Census	
White Men	15064
Black Men	29650
White Women	4459
Black Women	8775

Source: Reyes Rivas, 101.

The census only counts the men and women who lived inside the American section of the Canal Zone. Conniff calculates that, realistically, between 150,000-200,000 West Indians must have migrated to Panama in the era of construction, since in most years there were around 20,000 West Indians on the Commission payroll and there was high turnover: “Contemporaries estimated that only about a third of the West Indian community worked for the canal at any moment. The rest were dependents or had jobs and businesses in Panama's terminal cities.”<sup>2</sup> This was especially true of women, who rarely held Canal sponsored labor contracts and were less likely to live in the American Zone. Conniff does not account for gender differences, but based on his figures, one could guess up to 40,000 West Indian women migrated to the Canal during the ten year period of construction.

The motivations for migration of a group or individual can be complex. The

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Conniff, *Black Labor on a White Canal* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, 1985), 29.

commonly accepted “push-pull” hypothesis proposes that migration occurs because of socio-economic disparities between different regions.<sup>3</sup> Some factors “push” people away from a certain area, such as unemployment in the country of origin, and others “pull” them towards a destination, such as attractive job prospects or an increased standard of living. This hypothesis can make migration seem almost a mechanical act, and has been largely discredited due to the way it assumes homogeneity among migrant groups and its narrow focus on positive and negative factors. In the push-pull hypothesis, the Caribbean islands emerge as an undesirable place in comparison to the objectively “better” developed world offered by the American zone in Panama. Migration then reinforces the hierarchical division of center-periphery between “developing” and “developed” states. Though push-pull factors certainly affect migration, it is the perception of their presence and relative significance among migrants, along with individual desires, fears and ambitions that shape migration. In Colon Man a Come (2005), Rhonda Frederick analyzes the letters from West Indian migrants to the Isthmian Historical Society's 1963 contest for the best narratives of non-US citizen's personal experiences of the Canal. She emphasizes the migrants' complex motives for moving to Panama, usually going well beyond simple economics: “the sense of adventure, active participation, and personal ambition unveil workers' imagined selves as agents working in concert with seemingly dominant forces.”<sup>4</sup> The process of migration does not occur primarily in response to a negative condition or event, but exists as a linkage within the larger context of the African diaspora and of Caribbean, Panamanian and US life, economics and politics.

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<sup>3</sup> Velma Newton, *The Silver Men: West Indian Labour Migration to Panama, 1850-1914* (Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle, 2004), 4.

<sup>4</sup> Rhonda D. Frederick, “*Colon Man A Come*”: *Mythographies of Panama Canal Migration* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2005), 68.

The lure of American prosperity, plentiful wages and industrial fertility in the Canal attracted many West Indians who “conceived of the move as a means of freeing themselves—even if temporarily—from plantation labour and the stigma of slavery attached to it.”<sup>5</sup> Plantation labor declined in the 1800's as the competition from European and North American beet-sugar producers disrupted the Caribbean monopoly on the trade, even though the demand for sugar had increased internationally.<sup>6</sup> After the British government established the 1864 Sugar Duties Act, reducing preferential duties for sugar from former British colonies, the price of sugar from the West Indies rapidly decreased (Table 1). Many British West Indian planters suffered bankruptcy and abandoned their plantations, resulting in high unemployment.<sup>7</sup>

<b>Prices of Sugar Exports from Jamaica to the United Kingdom, 1846-1914</b>	
<i>Year</i>	<i>Shillings Paid per Hundredweight Sugar (rounded)</i>
1846	34
1850	27
1855	26
1857	35
1860	24
1865	22
1870	23
1875	20
1880	20
1885	13

<sup>5</sup> Newton, 7.

<sup>6</sup> Patrick Bryan, *The Jamaican People, 1880-1902: race, class and social control* (London: Macmillan Education Ltd, Warwick University Caribbean Studies, 1991), 2.

<sup>7</sup> Newton, 9.

1890	13
1895	10
1900	11
1905	11
1910	11
1914	12
<i>Source:</i> Newton, 9.	

Agricultural work in the islands further declined due to a bad run of natural disasters affecting Caribbean islands during the time prior to the construction of the canal, notably a series of alternating floods and droughts.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, on January 14, 1907, Kingston, Jamaica suffered a devastating earthquake that killed a large portion of the city population and destroyed most of its infrastructure.<sup>9</sup> Barbados also had to contend with severe overpopulation, which exacerbated unemployment.<sup>10</sup> Deteriorating conditions in the West Indies at the turn of the century, stemming from the depressed sugar industry and the resulting abandonment of plantation life, inclined West Indians who saw their rural lives worsening to create what Roberts calls “an imagined utopia” of the industrialized world provided by the U.S. in Panama.<sup>11</sup> Seeking a change from the work available in the West Indies and seized by a sense of adventure, black men and women traveled to the Panama Canal.

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<sup>8</sup> Trevor O'Reggio. *Between Alienation and citizenship: the evolution of Black West Indian society in Panama, 1914-1964* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2006), 36.

<sup>9</sup> The most famous source on the 1907 earthquake is the contemporary traveler account of British geographer Vaughan Cornish, “The Jamaica Earthquake (1907),” *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. XXXI, No. 8 (March 1908): 245-276.

<sup>10</sup> G.W. Roberts, “Emigration from Barbados,” *Social and Economic Studies* Vol. 4 No. 3 (Sept 1995): 245-288.

<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth M. Thomas-Hope, *Caribbean Migration* (Kingston: University of West Indies Press, 2002), 161.

Plantation slavery in the West Indies had established a degree of labor equality between black men and women, who had often been forced to toil under equally oppressive conditions. After emancipation, most men and women continued to work side by side in agriculture.<sup>12</sup> Starting in the mid 1800's, women pioneered the exodus from rural plantations to urban centers. In these towns, black women worked in petty trade or as domestic servants for whites and the rising middle-class of light-skinned blacks, quickly outnumbering the male population.<sup>13</sup> There, they sought to diversify their job options, separate themselves from plantation labor, and increase their wages. During this period, women's labor was highly visible, as women moved around big cities, establishing themselves as economically independent workers in the public eye.<sup>14</sup>

As they had moved to the urban centers, black women migrated to Panama in part for similar economic reasons. In her book Caribbean Migration, Elizabeth Hope explains that from an economic perspective, lower-class women had an equally high level of "migration potential" as men of the same socio-economic status, as they both sought stable employment and upward mobility.<sup>15</sup> This motivation is obvious in the statements many women made, such as the declaration from one Margaret P. Pole, a Martinique woman questioned during the Investigation: "I can't make as much money in Martinique as I can here, and I like it."<sup>16</sup> This was probably most true in the case of lower-class unskilled laborers from the West Indies. Skilled workers, who generally received higher wages, also traveled to the Canal, mainly from Jamaica where the emigration tax limited

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<sup>12</sup> Bryan, 6.

<sup>13</sup> Keith Hart, "The Sexual Division of Labor," in *Women and the sexual division of labor*, ed. Keith Hart (Kingston: Canoe Press University of the West Indies, 1996), 23.

<sup>14</sup> Olive Senior, *Working Miracles: Women's Lives in the English-speaking Caribbean* (London: James Currey, 1991), 107.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas-Hope, 4.

<sup>16</sup> Investigation, 965.

travel only to those who could afford it. The records show almost no women of the emerging middle-class of administrative, professional, and creative workers traveling to the Canal (see chapter 2 for a possible exception). These men and women might have felt financially secure enough that the promise of work in Panama provided no motivation, though many did later migrate to the US and Britain.

Marital status was another factor that affected women's decisions to travel to the Canal. Single women or women with absentee husbands would often travel to the Canal and become the main wage earners of the household. These women would often travel in large groups with other women, usually neighbors or friends. Kinship networks served an essential role in transmitting information about the Canal and encouraging others to move. For example, Jane Ortancia went to the canal with her friend, Jillui Richa. On their arrival, Jane moved in with Jillui and her husband Theodiele, forming a new household structure.<sup>17</sup> Friends and sisters accompanied each other to the Canal and would live together, such as friends Melanie Primeaux and Alcina Alcide.<sup>18</sup> Often these were young women, possibly seeking to live independent of their families' pressure for them to marry or settle down.

Women who were married had a different set of economic pressures. Usually, if the husband was already working in the Canal, he would send remittances to his family back home. Nevertheless, these men's wages were usually insufficient to maintain one or more families on another island. Some of the married Martiniquean women, like Julia Waugram, said they traveled to Panama "to help out" their husbands' income by doing

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<sup>17</sup> Investigation, 969.

<sup>18</sup> Investigation, 980. Also, see Maria Julia, 494 and Ida Raymond, 952.

small jobs on the side, such as washing.<sup>19</sup> Others, such as Naomy Etiene, whose husband labored on the Canal, contributed equally to the family income with her washing and ironing; the whole family worked to save money for their life together.<sup>20</sup> The life of the Guyanese poet Eric Walrond provides an example of this. After his family moved to Barbados, Walrond's father left for Panama in 1906. After five years, with no word or financial aid from her husband, Ruth Walrond, his mother, moved to Colon to seek employment that would support the whole family.<sup>21</sup> For Ruth Walrond and her family, Panama provided the possibility of starting anew and becoming financially independent. Ruth moved from Guyana to Barbados, where her family resided in a rural town, to the growing city of Colon, where she joined the multitudes of West Indian women seeking to start anew. Ruth's move shows that some Caribbean women also migrated to Panama to cope with the abandonment of a spouse. She was willing to uproot herself and her children from the relative stability of their life in Barbados to pursue a better life, despite her feckless husband. Even though conditions were difficult, especially for a single black mother, Ruth and her sons established themselves in Panama, where Eric continued to be educated and later became a journalist, a job that led to his migration to Harlem. Ruth, who had little money and no support, made the difficult decision to move her family somewhere where she saw opportunities for herself and her children.

Despite the difficult conditions in Panama, many women insisted on joining their husbands. Presumably, this was due in part to love, an oft-ignored pull factor. For example, in her affidavit to the Martiniquean investigation, a woman named Antoinette

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<sup>19</sup> Investigation, 958.

<sup>20</sup> Investigation, 958.

<sup>21</sup> Eric Walrond, "Winds can Wake up the Dead: "An Eric Walrond Reader, ed. Louis J. Parascandola (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998), 12.

Lanoise, fearful that she would be deported, passionately cried “If you send me back, [my husband] has got to go with me or I won’t go.”<sup>22</sup> Antoinette, like many other West Indian women of the period, wanted to be with her partner. West Indian women felt such connection not only to their husbands, but also for the many other men in their lives who had left for Panama—their sons, fathers, and uncles. Though economic opportunity was a main pull factor in black women’s migration to the Canal, many other motivations, including love, influenced their decision to migrate on a personal level. Black women’s individual decisions often depended on the perception of what the move would mean for a relationship or a family.<sup>23</sup> The silence around such personal motivations continues to paint the Canal as a purely economic venture when in fact many people’s thoughts and feelings were also part of the Panama experience. Acknowledging the role of love does not take away women’s agency in the migration process. In fact, it adds to the complexity of their story and the story of the Canal.

The Isthmian Canal Commission sent recruiters to the West Indies in search of labor for the construction of the Canal. These recruiters also contracted women for the few Commission sponsored jobs open to women in the Canal such as teachers in West Indian schools or nurses, washerwomen and janitors for the hospitals and hotels in the American sector. During the 1906 investigation into the alleged prostitution of the Martiniqueans (see chapter 3), most of the women cited a Mr. Lavenel as the agent responsible for informing them of the job opportunities in the Canal. In their affidavits, they said Lavenel had told them there was plenty of work and good wages. Clement Calestine, for example, says Lavenel told her about working as a domestic in the hotel in

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<sup>22</sup> Investigation, 975.

<sup>23</sup> Suzanne Sinke, “Migration for Labor, Migration for Love: Marriage and Family formation across Borders,” *Magazine of History*, Vol. 14, No. 1, Migrations (Fall 1999): 17-21.

Corosal and that she “would be well treated there.”<sup>24</sup>

But most West Indian women arriving in Panama had not been recruited. Rumor and word of mouth were successful in circulating the image of Panama as a land of economic prosperity. Everyone knew of somebody who had left the islands in search of work in the Canal. Many women waited to migrate until their husbands had saved enough money working in Panama to pay their passage. Advertisements in local newspapers by Commission agents such as the one below from Kingston’s *Daily Gleaner* on December 4, 1905 also disseminated news about job opportunities in Panama, though these were mostly geared towards men. Most contracts were not available to women, but the constant newspaper ads informed everyone of the possibilities.

Wanted  
Labourers for Panama  
By the Panama Railroad Company. 75 able-bodied men  
to work on their docks, railway tracks and otherwise on the  
following terms: Free passage there and back here, free  
board and lodgings with good food and medical attendance.  
Wages 70 cents per day gold U.S. Currency with 15 cents  
per hour overtime. Recruiting at Sutton Street Jail on  
Monday 11<sup>th</sup> December at 8 in the morning. Every appli-  
cant must show good vaccination marks and pass a medical  
examination. The export tax of 25s. Will be paid by the  
Company.

William Orrett,  
Attorney of the  
Panama Railway.<sup>25</sup>

Each island government reacted differently to labor recruitment from the Canal. Barbados and Jamaica provided most of the workers for the Canal Zone, yet they had completely different policies on emigration. In 1893 Jamaica passed the Emigrant Labourer's Protection Law, stating that anyone who wished to emigrate to certain

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<sup>24</sup> Investigation, 956.

<sup>25</sup> Daily Gleaner, December 4, 1905, Kingston, Jamaica. Newton, 81.

“proclaimed places” as decided by the Governor, had to obtain a permit and fulfill certain conditions. The laborer either had to have a contract and a recruiting agent prepared to pay £1 to the Distressed Emigrant's Fund or produce two persons with property worth £10 who would back him.<sup>26</sup> The contracts had to state clearly the terms of the job engagement and had to be approved by a police inspector. The Jamaican government stipulated these conditions as a safeguard against spending public money to assist Jamaicans abroad. It feared repeating the earlier financial disaster of repatriating the Jamaicans who had left to work on the French canal in the 1880's. The law also had the effect of limiting emigration by unskilled workers from Jamaica, since only workers who already had some financial security could meet the conditions it stipulated. In 1895, Panama became a “proclaimed place” to which the law applied.<sup>27</sup> The Governor allowed the Commission to recruit workers in Jamaica, but they still had to pay £1 per person. Women who wished to travel to Panama ran into difficulty if coming from Jamaica, since most of them could not obtain a contract in advance and were generally regarded as less financially secure. Barbados, on the other hand, placed no financial restrictions on emigration until 1911, when the number of emigrants had already declined.<sup>28</sup> The government did, however, seek to control emigration through the Emigration Act of March 18<sup>th</sup>, 1904, which required a magistrate to oversee contracts and protected agents from breaches of contract, among other things.<sup>29</sup> Barbadian women could thus more easily travel to Panama, as long as they could pay the passage. Yet they traveled blind, not knowing whether a job truly awaited them in Panama. On their arrival, women

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<sup>26</sup> Newton, 60.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 60.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 66-70.

<sup>29</sup> Roberts, 270.

searched for jobs in the construction camps and terminal cities.

During the era of construction, mail ships such as ones from the Royal Mail Steam Packet Company, doubled as the means of transportation from the islands to the port of Colon and other Central American cities. Women were less likely to travel with a labor contract awaiting them in Panama, meaning they had to cover the expense of travel themselves. Willis Abbot, in his 1913 account of his trip to the Canal, recounts his travel by Royal Mail Steamer accompanied by a “cargo of black ivory,” black men sailing to Colon to work on Canal construction. These men traveled topside, away from the passenger quarters that men like Abbott inhabited. The trip lasted from five to thirteen days, during which the black passengers were exposed to the weather and enjoyed few comforts, apart from small meals.<sup>30</sup> Though the men were “inoffensive” during the trip, Abbott mentions a rumor that “on the smaller ships that carry them by hundreds for the 500 miles for five dollars each, they sometimes riot and make trouble.”<sup>31</sup> Such ships also brought West Indian women to the Canal. During the course of the investigation on the Martiniquan women, Samuel Purcell Hendrick, Archdeacon of the Church of England in Panama, describes the arrival of these women in his affidavit:

“Affiant knows of the arrival in Colon of the steamship *Floridian*, having on board about 650 passengers from the island of Martinique, among which were about 280 colored women, many of whom claimed to be wives of men on board the vessel and others wives of Martiniquean employees who had preceded them to the Isthmus.”<sup>32</sup>

On arrival, women from the West Indies settled into different communities generally depending on their marital status. Married women usually came to meet husbands or partners who were already established in the Zone, and had saved up some

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<sup>30</sup> Conniff, 27.

<sup>31</sup> Willis John Abbott, *Panama and the Canal in picture and prose* (New York: Syndicate Publishing Company, 1913), 22.

<sup>32</sup> Investigation, 936.

money. Black Canal workers were provided barracks for housing by the Commission, but there they had to contend with the segregationist policies of the American administration. They lived in substandard and unsanitary housing, the food was terrible and workers had no access to recreational facilities. Segregation was institutionalized by separating the workforce into “gold roll” and “silver roll” employees, a system resembling Jim Crow. Nominally, the law required only that whites be paid in gold and black West Indians be paid in silver. However, the system grew to include separation of public facilities as well as the provision of lower quality services for the West Indian community. Moreover, the Zone administration provided married housing for white but not for West Indian workers, meaning that most West Indian women were not welcomed in the Zone. As a result, many West Indian families opted to decline the free quarters and “make their homes in shacks of their own” usually in the terminal cities of Colon and Panama outside the direct surveillance of the Canal authorities.<sup>33</sup> These towns sat next to white Canal towns, close to the workplaces of many West Indian women. George Frenkel describes the geographical segregation of black and white towns, where a “sanitized” American suburbia lay next to a makeshift ghetto. He argues that the US administration inscribed its racist ideologies in the Zone by constructing adjacent pairs of segregated black and white towns, such as Cristobal, a white administrative town, and the West Indian town of Silver City.<sup>34</sup> Married women who traveled to the Canal where a husband awaited them, usually moved into a house in one of these “black towns”.

The gold and silver roll system affected black women in different ways than it affected men. Since their work patterns differed from those of the male Canal laborers,

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<sup>33</sup> Abbott, 344.

<sup>34</sup> Stephen Frenkel, “Geographical representations of the “Other”: the landscape of the Panama Canal Zone,” *Journal of Historical Geography*, Vol. 28, Issue 1 (January 2002): 85-99, page 93.

black women were less subject to overt discrimination in relation to pay and public facilities. West Indian women who worked as teachers in American schools for West Indian children were paid in gold, though their salaries were usually lower than for white teachers.<sup>35</sup> In the early days of the Canal, when the system of public segregation was less fully established (though the roll system was already in place for Canal workers), black and white women frequented the same public spaces. Moreover, women who worked as domestics often made purchases from “gold roll” commissary shops, when running errands for their employers. In her 1956 memoir about the early years of the Canal, Rose Van Hardeveld describes her first outing to the commissary shop owned by a Chinese man and her interaction with the first two West Indian women she meets: “Two black women in ragged dirty dresses had come in and were jabbering at the Chinese, but he paid no attention to them. I was reminded of Kipling's ‘Here's to you, Fuzzy Wuzzy’ when I glanced at these two black faces with their hair standing up in a stiff fuzzy brush.”<sup>36</sup> Van Hardeveld's encounter with these black women, heavily tinged with her initial prejudice, highlights the space of the Canal as a “contact zone,” where “subjects previously separated by geographical and historical disjunctures” now intersected with each other in a micro-community of international power relations.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, it turns out that the “jabbering” black women are multilingual, helping the newly arrived Van Hardeveld negotiate with the Chinese salesperson, who only speaks Spanish. They translate her words, serving as intermediaries.

Photographs, even more than printed sources, powerfully illustrate the living

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<sup>35</sup> Eyra Marcela Reyes Rivas, *El Trabajo de la Mujeres en la Construcción del Canal de Panamá, 1881-1914* (Panama: Universidad de Panamá, Instituto de la Mujer, 2000), 136.

<sup>36</sup> Rose Van Hardeveld, *Panama Canal Bride: A Story of Construction Days* (New York: Exposition, 1955), 26.

<sup>37</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel writing and transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992), 7

conditions of West Indians in these Panama cities (Image 1 &2). The one-room homes were made of leftover wood and zinc ceilings, built close to one another. The streets were generally unpaved and often filled with trash. Since there were no dedicated public spaces or recreational facilities, and the houses were small, people lived outside, in the porches and streets of their neighborhoods—many sat outside to talk, watch, do laundry or pass the time. The pictures show houses built on stilts, a common mode of construction in the Zone, to protect inhabitants from rats, insects and other animals, and to provide natural air circulation in the hot climate.<sup>38</sup> The houses were often built on top of swamps, so that people would have to put down planks of wood to be able to walk across the area.<sup>39</sup> The sanitation department led by William Gorgas, which had labored so intensely to rid the Canal Zone of disease and especially to combat malaria, paid less attention to outlying West Indian communities, thus “no attempt was made to screen all the barracks and shacks that housed the workers.”<sup>40</sup> The pictures show the overcrowded houses surrounded by rubble and garbage, all of which made these homes serious fire traps. Along with the lack of garbage and sewage disposal in their communities, houses were often built next to stagnant water, breeding grounds for disease-carrying insects. Malaria from these insects was one of the main causes of the high mortality rate among West Indians in Panama. The total number of deaths among West Indians in the decade of construction, mostly due to disease or (generally, for men) industrial accidents, ranged around 15,000 persons, or about one out of every ten immigrants.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Lancelot Lewis, *The West Indian in Panama: Black Labor in Panama, 1850-1914* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1980), 50.

<sup>39</sup> Newton, 151.

<sup>40</sup> Abbott, 345.

<sup>41</sup> Conniff, 31.

Limited to certain spaces, many West Indian communities grew on the edges of railroad tracks, where the noise of the trains must have pervaded the environment. In the story “Tropic Death” (1926), Eric Walrond described the tenements of the West Indian community in Colon as “a row of lecherous huts.”<sup>42</sup> Though Americans criticized West Indian's lustful nature and their illegal concubinage, Walrond here is speaking less about sexuality and more of the proximity of bodies. West Indians in these neighborhoods lived in intimate quarters in a way that connected them all physically. Even though conditions were harsh, Julie Greene argues, West Indians moved out of the Zone because “geographical and occupational mobility provided one of the most effective tools for creating independence for themselves in the regimented and industrialized Canal Zone” for West Indian men and women.<sup>43</sup> Outside the Canal Zone, West Indians had more freedom in public space and fewer limitations on private behavior, particularly regarding their marital status.

The pictures also show the gendered spaces of these West Indian communities. In the first picture, the women and children all stand together in an alley between houses, among the lines of laundry hung precariously to windows and stilts. The domestic life of black women did not take place in the privacy of a home. The houses were too close to each other and often crowded with large families. Instead, child-rearing, laundry and other domestic tasks took place outside. The second picture shows a building by the railroad tracks, with a group of black women standing on the balcony. A woman walks on the tracks with the trappings of the middle-class, a nice shawl and a parasol. The women, young and old together, stare down onto the tracks standing in front of the entrances to

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<sup>42</sup> Walrond, 266.

<sup>43</sup> Greene, 124.

their homes, surrounded by laundry hangings. Few or no men can be seen around these houses, just as no women appear in the pictures of Canal laborers. The picture somewhat implies a segregation of black women to the domestic spaces, but they are all actually outside, interacting with other members of the contact zone of Panama.

Single women, arriving in Panama with few or no contacts or knowledge of the area, did not have an easy time making living arrangements. But some single women lived alone in the West Indian communities. Many domestic servants received in-house lodging and meals along with a meager salary in exchange for their work in American households.<sup>44</sup> Single black women within the Canal Zone lived with more restrictions, policed by the American authorities. Many of the Martiniquean women involved in the prostitution investigation of 1906 described their living conditions in Commission-established camps, “protected all night by watchmen and policemen, and no one is allowed to come there,” nor is anyone allowed to go out after 9:00 p.m.<sup>45</sup> These camps may have fostered a support network for the newly arrived immigrant women, the counterpoint to the male Canal barracks.

Church life played a significant role in West Indian communities in Panama. Canal authorities encouraged religious life and spent around \$100,000 renovating buildings for church use and paying priests and ministers.<sup>46</sup> In the early years of Canal construction, the Anglican Church, the religion of many British West Indian immigrants, quickly established itself in thirteen congregations around the Zone.<sup>47</sup> Other denominations also established churches in the area, including Catholic, Baptist,

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<sup>44</sup> Such as Ida Raymond and Janie Louisa of Martinique, Investigation, 952.

<sup>45</sup> Investigation, 947.

<sup>46</sup> Conniff, 38.

<sup>47</sup> George Westerman, “Historical Notes on West Indians on the Isthmus of Panama,” *Phylon* Vol 22, No. 4 (4<sup>th</sup> Quarter, 1961): 340-350, page 342.

Methodist Episcopal, the Salvation Army and several non-denominational sects. The clergymen, though generally white and American or British, regularly traveled about the Canal Zone and visited the homes and communities of their largely West Indian congregations. Father Larridan of the Roman Catholic church, in his testimony during the Martiniquean women investigation, describes having “visited frequently the towns and camps of Culebra, Bas Obispo, Bohio, and Tavernilla.” He also noted that “in all those towns he has come in contact with laborers and their families in the barracks and houses in which they live, where he has visited them when sick.”<sup>48</sup> Due to the lack of public recreational facilities for West Indians in the Zone, the church became the main social gathering place in these communities.

One of the stories in Walrond's Tropic Death collection, “The Wharf Rats,” characterizes the Caribbean population of the Canal Zone in a way that is rarely spoken about.<sup>49</sup> Along with the established churches, many Caribbeans practiced religious and spiritual traditions from the islands, reminiscent of Central and West African practices, such as *obeah*. In the story, Walrond says that *obeah* “honeycombed the life of the Negro laboring camps” and to question it “was to be an accursed pale-face, dog of a white.” Walrond's characterization of *obeah* emphasizes the racial tensions of the Canal—that to deny *obeah*, a product of the black Caribbean, was to become a white man. “The Wharf Rats” concerns Maffi, a Trinidadian girl and *obeah* practitioner, whose jealousy of the relationship between Phillip, “a good looking black fellow,” and Panamanian-born mulatto Maura drives her to revenge. Though the central figure of the practice is usually

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<sup>48</sup> Investigation, 940.

<sup>49</sup> Walrond, 210-221. Frederick's *Colon Man A Come* has a wonderful analysis of this story as representative of the diversity of the Canal population, even within Caribbeans communities, but she does not discuss the role of women in the story. Rhonda D Frederick, “*Colon Man A Come*”: *Mythographies of Panama Canal Migration* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2005), 149-151.

the *obeah* man, this story places a dark-skinned black girl as the powerful *obeah* practitioner, who ultimately benefits from its dark magic. *Obeah* was widely practiced by West Indians in the Canal Zone and Walrond's story suggests that women played a central role. But how did the practice of *obeah* work itself out in real (as opposed to fictional) relationships? To what extent was it a source of strength (and/or income) for West Indian women in Panama? Were *obeah* women valued or feared in their communities? Unfortunately, the sources do not provide answers to these questions.

Black women from the West Indies also heard the call from Colon. Like the male protagonists of most stories about Panama, West Indian women migrated there in part for economic reasons, lured by the financial prospects of the Canal Zone. But the decision to migrate was motivated on a personal level by many other factors including love, a desire for adventure, better social conditions and a new beginning away from the constraints of a place heavy with their past. These women traveled in varied circumstances: some were married, others single; some had jobs waiting for them, most hoped to find a job there. After an uncomfortable boat ride, women arrived in Panama and usually settled in established West Indian communities with husbands, family or friends. The next chapters will deal in depth with their work, family life and their relationship to the state and the courts.

## Chapter 2

### “Come to see Janie”: Labor, Surveillance and Independence

We've come to see Janie  
We've come to see Janie, we've come to see Janie  
We've come to see Janie, and how is she now?  
Janie is washing, washing, washing  
washing her clothes and cannot be seen  
Goodbye. Goodbye (6 times)  
and we'll come back again  
Come to see Janie, Janie, Janie  
We've come to see Janie, and how is she now?  
She's ironing her clothes (3 times)  
and cannot be seen  
Goodbye (6 times)  
Come to see Janie, Janie, see Janie (bis)

We've come to see Janie, and how is she now?  
Janie is sick, and Janie is sick, Janie is sick  
and cannot be seen  
Goodbye (6 times)  
and we'll come back again  
come to see Janie, we've come to see  
Janie, we've come to see Janie  
and how is she now?  
Janie is dead, dead, dead; Janie is dead  
and cannot be seen.<sup>1</sup>

A popular West Indian working song in Panama, “We've come to see Janie” describes the life of a West Indian woman who spends all her time working. “We,” the singers, are people who care about Janie—her family, her friends, her community. The song is an exchange about Janie between “we” and a third person—Janie's boss. The group comes to visit Janie, but her employer turns them away. In the first verse, when they ask the boss “how” Janie is, the boss responds instead with what work Janie is

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<sup>1</sup> Eyra Marcela Reyes Rivas, *El Trabajo de la Mujeres en la Construcción del Canal de Panamá, 1881-1914* (Panama: Universidad de Panamá, Instituto de la Mujer, 2000), 145.

doing. For the boss, Janie's work is her priority. Yet, the group persists, repeating that they will come back to see Janie. Janie's work, and her boss' authority, severs the connection between Janie and her family or community; between Janie and the social world. The song shows the strong power the boss has over Janie's space. The boss does not allow anyone in her family to see Janie—only the boss can know what she is doing at all times. As she continues to work and her health deteriorates, the boss still restricts her to the house of work and prohibits her relatives from seeing her or taking care of her. On their last visit, the boss tells them Janie is dead. Janie's boss restricts her to a life of monotonous work in domestic service.

The song represents a particular experience of the relationship between white American bosses and West Indian women in the Canal. Though in the song Janie is completely subject to the bosses' power, the sources show that in fact West Indian women and white Americans constantly negotiated the boundaries of authority and restriction between boss and worker in the contact zone of the Canal. The song's version of a West Indian woman's life mirrors a general attitude towards black women in Panama that has permeated most historical work about the Canal—that black women lived lives of invisibility. Though historians have diminished their position as laborers in Canal society only to domestic service, black women actually performed a variety of jobs essential to the smooth running of everyday life in Panama. Such work affected their daily lives and their position in Canal society, providing black women with varying degrees of freedom and authority.

There is no specific census data on how many women worked in domestic service, but the stories white women tell suggest that most of them had one, perhaps

several, domestic servants working in their households. Domestic service was the form of labor for black women that was most visible and accessible to the white Americans who wrote the history of the Canal Zone. This means that the records that do exist, such as memoirs from white American women, largely reflect the American perception of black women's work. Nevertheless, it is probable that most black women in the Canal did work in domestic service.

In the post-emancipation Caribbean, work roles had begun to follow a more gender-specific pattern. Men continued to work as agricultural laborers or migrated to do industrial work on the Canal. Some women also continued working in rural areas, but many more moved to the urban centers and took the main job opportunities available to women as domestics. This gendered division of labor translated to the Canal Zone, where the Commission explicitly promoted gender-specific hiring practices.<sup>2</sup> Greene estimates that three out of four non-US citizen women working in the Canal Zone for independent employers were domestic servants.<sup>3</sup> These women engaged in the role of social reproduction—nurturing the children, feeding the family, taking care of the house. The migration of West Indian women provided the Canal community with workers the American administration did not have to pay for, unlike the male workers whose passage was funded by the Commission. Nevertheless, these women's labor was absolutely necessary to the running of Canal society.

Faced with low productivity and worker morale, the U.S. Government encouraged

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<sup>2</sup> This trend only continues to grow. Post-1960 West Indian migration into (mostly) the U.S. And Britain has been overwhelmingly female, driven by the demand for domestic labor. In 1980, the Anglophone Caribbean female-to-male ratio of immigrants was 85.8. Author, “Caribbean Migrations: The Caribbean Diaspora,” in *Encyclopedia of the African Diaspora: Origins, Experiences and Culture, Volume 1*, Carole Boyce Davies, ed. (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2008), 277.

<sup>3</sup> Julie Greene, *The Canal Builders* (New York: Penguin Group, 2009), 257.

white American women to come to Panama to provide a stable home and three meals a day for their working husbands, thereby promoting greater job satisfaction and labor stability. This migration was portrayed as an Americanizing mission. U.S. Officials, faced with high levels of employee desertion, wanted to make the Canal Zone feel like the civilized world—or, as Americans in the Zone described it, “a small bit of the United States transplanted to alien soil.”<sup>4</sup> Through the work of women in the private realm of the home, the Canal Zone could become a “hyper-American suburb” that would civilize the surrounding Panama “jungle.”<sup>5</sup> By contrast, few immigrant women from the Caribbean arrived in Panama with the promise of work in white households. Their arrival was not explicitly encouraged. In fact, the Commission did not even provide married housing for West Indian laborers. The Commission encouraged white American couples to have homes and foster domesticity, while West Indians could only live in the Zone either as servant-dependents in white homes or clustered in labor camps.

Almost every book about the Panama Canal has a short blurb on West Indian women, noting only that they migrated following their husbands and found jobs as domestics. Though it was the most common job for West Indian women, in the primary sources, domestic servants appear as wholly interchangeable figures with no personalities. Except for a few comments from the Martiniquean investigation, there are no primary sources where domestic servants speak, though this is true of West Indian women in general. But while in the accounts by Americans other workers emerge as vivacious, interesting figures, stories about servants usually revolve around minor

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<sup>4</sup> Greene, 231.

<sup>5</sup> The phrase “hyper-American suburb” in reference to the white American towns of the Canal Zone comes from: Stephen Frenkel, “Geographical representations of the ‘Other’: the landscape of the Panama Canal Zone,” *Journal of Historical Geography*, Vol. 28, Issue 1 (January 2002): 85-99.

domestic disputes or humorous language mix-ups. Domestic servants are ever-present in the background of memoirs from American women, but these housewives either cycle through servants so quickly that none of them seem important or they simply do not talk about them very much. This silence could be due to the position of black women in American homes, usually living under twenty-four hour surveillance by their bosses. Clearly these women had private lives, but this does not emerge in the stories from American women because, in their eyes, maids were always under their control.

The relationships with domestic servants in the early years of construction must have been a shock for the American women. Many of these women came from rural Midwestern backgrounds, where they had had little or no contact with black women. Rose Van Hardeveld's first encounter with black women in the Canal commissary, when she nicknames them "Fuzzy-Wuzzys," highlights her inexperience with black people.<sup>6</sup> Rose can only comprehend their presence through a dimly-remembered racist poem. Elizabeth Parker describes her realization of the strangeness of the cultural contact between the two races during her wedding breakfast on the first day of her arrival in Panama: "As we sat down to our wedding breakfast, I was aware of more contrasts—the long table on the narrow screened porch, thick white china, plated silver, pate de fois gras, champagne, roast turkey—all served awkwardly by a little Jamaican maid in a gingham dress."<sup>7</sup> Parker also describes the difficult relationship between American housewives and their domestic servants, placing the bulk of the blame on the maids, whom she deemed unfit for even the simplest tasks of an American household: "Along with the battle of the insects came the battle of the maids and houseboys. Most of the

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<sup>6</sup> Rose Van Hardeveld, *Make the dirt Fly!* (Hollywood, CA: Pan Press, 1956), 26. See chapter 1.

<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Parker, *Panama Canal Bride: A Story of Construction Days* (New York: Exposition, 1955), 17.

maids were definitely untrained, in fact, unfamiliar with what seemed to us the most ordinary matters pertaining to housework....They had as much difficulty in understanding us as we had in trying to fathom their strange accent and different points of view.”<sup>8</sup> But the American housewives were generally also “untrained” in supervising a live-in domestic worker, cohabiting with women of a different race and doing housework in the setting of Panama. As unprepared as they might have been, American and West Indian women were dependent on each other in the domestic setting, since American homes provided most of the jobs for black women and black women provided labor and knowledge essential to running a home in Panama.

Many Americans complained about West Indians' lack of technological knowledge, such as the maid who referred to a watch as a “pocket engine” and a doorbell as a squealing button.<sup>9</sup> A friend of Elizabeth Parker's, Kay, explains this lack of knowledge condescendingly as a “lack of civilization”:

“No, said Kay, I've been here six months and I still can't understand what my maid, Jane, wants when I go to the commissary. I've had two girls already...They seems so stupid, but when I tried to do without one, I decided they weren't so dumb after all. We have to realize they've never seen the inside of a civilized home before. They've always cooked on charcoal braziers, washed their clothes in the river, and used gourds for dishes.”<sup>10</sup>

Kay falls back on a dichotomy between civilized Americans and savage, poor blacks, but she also concedes her dependence on the labor of these women. Kay also lists the many tasks for West Indian maids—they had to cook, launder, shop, clean the house and take care of children. The work of a live-in domestic was endless and they had to be

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<sup>8</sup> Parker, 31.

<sup>9</sup> “A Diamond not yet Polished,” in *Maid in Panama*, ed. Sue Pearl Core (Dobbs Ferry, NY: Clermont Press, 1938), 58.

<sup>10</sup> Parker, 27.

constantly available to their bosses.

Kay continues to relate the reason her first maid left her: "My first maid, Mary, was doing fairly well. Then she came to me one day and said she couldn't work anymore because she was 'making a baby'. I asked her if her husband had a job and she said, 'Usban! 'uh! Hi don' 'as no truck wid 'usbans'"<sup>11</sup> Kay and Elizabeth interpret this occasion as yet more proof that West Indians have low moral standards with respect to marriage and sexuality. West Indian women had many children out of wedlock, and most West Indian couples lived in unsanctioned concubinage. Americans often discuss this disapprovingly and the Canal Commission and churches heavily discouraged the practice. But Kay's story also offers a rare glimpse into the personal decisions made by West Indian women working as domestic servants. Kay is surprised that Mary decides to leave for a pregnancy—to her, the decision just came out of the blue. Kay has no idea whether Mary even has a husband. Kay's surprise about Mary's social life shows the disparity between white bosses' perception of their control over their maids versus the real extent of their authority. Though the sources are silent on the matter, West Indian women probably had some opportunities to socialize with other members of the community during ventures to town to shop or to launder at the river. A pregnancy, proof of a life external to the American home, is surprising to Kay, who presumes that Mary is constantly working. West Indian women like Mary did not in fact live a sequestered life and would quit their jobs to pursue other personal matters. Moreover, Mary saw maternal leave as her right. In the end, Kay fires Mary, but Mary was probably aware of that possibility and still chose to prioritize motherhood.

Another common theme in these memoirs is the high turnover of domestics in

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<sup>11</sup> Parker, 27.

American households. Elizabeth Parker and Rose Van Hardeveld cycle through four or five maids in the course of their memoirs. Job security for domestics must have been somewhat low, given the abundance of laborers available in the Canal area, especially later in the construction years. Americans could easily replace a servant deemed unfit. On the other hand, the turnover could have been due to domestics who would quit and find new jobs, exerting some control over their environment. Servants, whose work lives were limited by the domestic space, could achieve some mobility by quitting their jobs and finding new bosses.

Julie Greene argues that “unless [West Indian women's] actions seemed potentially threatening to labor productivity, they could often move in a less controlled space [than men].”<sup>12</sup> It is true that their actions were less subject to state or legal supervision—except for the Martiniquean Investigation, the state rarely paid much attention to working West Indian women. But the argument assumes that control flows only from state institutions, ignoring the fact that many West Indian women lived and worked in the limiting environment of American homes. Unfortunately, the lack of vivid primary sources obscures the day-to-day lives of these women. If they existed, such sources could potentially show the power struggles between bosses and workers and the details of West Indian women's lives outside the home. American bosses desired invisibility from their domestic servants. Black women, who Americans were used to seeing as non-persons back home, fit into these homes as servants in the background. Thus, many aspects of domestic's private lives and their agency in the domestic drama of the contact zone remain hidden in the sources, generally written or edited by Americans. Domestic servants, for example, probably gossiped with their friends or co-workers about

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<sup>12</sup> Greene, 255.

their lives and the lives of their bosses, emphasizing their separateness from the bosses and mocking them in their spaces of authority. They engaged in actions beyond their workplace and defied the erasing authority of their white bosses. Nevertheless, Greene's statement might be better applied to other West Indian women workers in the Canal Zone who worked outside of American homes and had more independence and mobility.

The recurring image of West Indian women as domestics painted by Canal historians obscures the other types of labor performed by black women, especially the work that was not performed inside a home. Memoirs from white American women show that they had frequent interactions with two other kinds of black female workers—laundresses and street vendors. In both of these jobs, women functioned as independent entrepreneurs. These women would contract their services out to American families and workers in the Canal, often asking them to provide the start-up costs for their business. An American housewife describes her first interaction with her laundress as follows: “Kate, first wash woman I had on the Isthmus, outlined for me during our initial conference, the various purchases I should make to start off our laundress-lady combination. She enumerated soap, starch, blueing, clothes pins, ironing board, iron, washboard and tub. Kate was a particular lady of definite convictions, and gave me careful instructions as to the exact brand of each commodity which she preferred. Wishing to please her, I made careful note in order not to make a mistake in their purchase.”<sup>13</sup> The person recounts the story in a humorous tone, reversing the authority between her and Kate and highlighting the absurdity of the white American “lady” having to do work for the laundress. Yet, she did indeed provide these things for Kate. Kate, and other laundresses of the Canal, provided a service that was absolutely necessary and this

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<sup>13</sup> Core, 33.

gave them a form of power, to choose their customers and request the materials they needed. West Indian women were thus using employer's capital to set up independent businesses in the Canal Zone. These independent businesses, created separately from the American Canal business that would soon leave black men unemployed, strengthened the West Indian communities in Panama.

Washing machines were still uncommon in the early twentieth-century, so most laundry had to be done outside. American women, especially in the early years of construction, constantly complained about the discomfort of being outside. Panama seemed like a jungle, too hot, too many bugs. Washing was difficult work and was better left to Caribbean workers who were used to the climate. Most West Indian women who contracted with American families washed the clothes outside in backyards using tubs and soap provided by their bosses. Others, who did not have patrons, did laundry on the river: "One of the familiar sights of this hamlet is the village washing place, a pool near the railroad tracks, formed by the swirling of the water in the Frijolita River at a point where it is turned at right angles to its previous course by the interposition of a bank of clay and rock. The method of washing clothes among the lower-class natives and the West Indians can be observed here."<sup>14</sup> These river laundries were meeting grounds for the women who would get together to work and talk to pass the time while doing this difficult and monotonous task. Rose Van Hardeveld describes a scene in an outdoor laundry, expressing her disdain for the local methods: "On the far bank of the stream, squatted on the rocks, a company of women gathered each day to wash...I watched this gabbling bunch of black women at their work and decided that our family wash should

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<sup>14</sup> John Owen Collins, *The Panama Guide* (Mount Hope, C.Z.: I.C.C. Press, Quartermaster's Department, 1912), 24.

never go to the city laundry.”<sup>15</sup> West Indian women are relegated to the space of the city laundry by the power relations that consistently place them in the same sorts of employment, but it is also a space for socializing that white Americans like Rose could not penetrate or even understand. Black laundresses could work on their own time, among friends, and were free to do as they liked.

Whereas live-in domestic workers shared their daily lives with their bosses, most laundresses maintained a separate home life, traveling to the American neighborhoods only to work. The “laundress-lady” relationship depended on carefully constructed boundaries. The American housewife clearly held the economic power, but the stories show that most white women acted deferentially towards West Indian women because the service they provided seemed so grueling, yet so necessary. Because laundresses were semi-independent contractors, they had more authority in relation to the American “ladies”. Laundry, a seemingly menial task, was essential to the smooth operations of the Canal, from house to hospital to hotel. A story from Maid in Panama shows the tensions beneath the laundress-lady performance:

A bridge-playing friend has a laundress named Angelina. Huge, black, and complacent, Angelina appears for work on stated days of the week and then vanishes once more into the unknown world wherein dwell the colored people who help us in our homes.

One day Mrs. Phelps wanted some special work done; and as the laundress would not appear again for several days, drove down to the section of town where she lived. After some little time she managed to locate the house where Angelina lived.

The white lady found Angelina's room fairly swarming with progeny. Little chocolate-colored pickaninnies of every age and hue stood in wooly-headed curiosity, looking at their mammy's “White Lady” come to call. Among the brood, Mrs. Phelps noted with amazement one little white child about two years old...evidently a relic of some white man's disregard for the color line. With the singularly fair skin which such half-castes have, and its head thickly clustered with little golden curls, it was really a pretty baby; and

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<sup>15</sup> Van Hardevelt, 42.

the visitor commented upon it.

“Is that your baby, Angelina?” she asked.

Without any visible enthusiasm, Angelina admitted, yes, it was.

“Why, what a *pretty* baby!” her mistress exclaimed. When her remark was met with noncomittal glumness, she went on, “Don’t *you* think that it’s a pretty baby, Angelina?”

“Yes’m,” answered Angelina, but one could tell that her heart was not in her words.

Finally the stolid indifference of her face changed a trifle and she burst out, “Yes’m, he’s pretty, all right. But I tells you for true, Miz Phelps, I ain’t never goin’ to have no more white babies. They shows the dirt too plain!”<sup>16</sup>

The first part of the story highlights the separation between Angelina, the laundress, and Mrs. Phelps, her employer. Angelina comes to Mrs. Phelps' only when doing her job, but separates her home life from her work life. Angelina's neighborhood is the “unknown” world of the “colored help”. Mrs. Phelps believes Angelina “vanishes” to her home because she is “complacent” and lazy. Feeling self-righteous, Mrs. Phelps has no hesitation about seeking Angelina out in the West Indian neighborhood to do a special job at her bidding. Though Angelina only has access to Mrs. Phelps' home as a worker, Mrs. Phelps enters Angelina's realm as the boss, the “White Lady”, and proceeds to judge her lifestyle, commenting on her many “pickaninnies” and singling out the light-skinned child as the product of a relationship of which she disapproves. Of the many children, Mrs. Phelps' decides only the white one deserves her attention and she prods Angelina to agree with her that it's a pretty baby. Mrs. Phelps interprets Angelina's response as indifference and presents this in a humorous manner, as if the only cause of this behavior was her belief that the baby seemed dirtier with white skin.

In the end, the narrator interprets Angelina's lifestyle for laughs, and presents her as a dirty, oversexed and uneducated woman. The story does not acknowledge the possibility that Angelina has an inner life. The white female narrator denies Angelina any

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<sup>16</sup> Core, 181

personality beyond the one that, in her position of power, she has assigned Angelina to reinforce the image of amusing interactions between American bosses and West Indian workers. Mrs. Phelps entered Angelina's home, stared disdainfully at her children, focused exclusively on the light skinned baby and then forced Angelina to respond to her condescension ("Don't *you* think that's a pretty baby, Angelina?"). The story presents Angelina as a simple-minded creature rather than exploring the possibility of her glumness being due to Mrs. Phelps' intrusion and judgment of her lifestyle. Though the day-to-day performance of the "laundress-lady" relationship places the black woman as the authority, Mrs. Phelps' story shows that Americans believed in their power over the spaces of the Canal Zone.

On the other hand, Angelina does not act deferentially towards her boss—though Mrs. Phelps misinterprets her reaction, Angelina makes her anger and discomfort obvious. In fact, Angelina's response to Mrs. Phelps could be read as a joke at her employer's expense, implying that white people are dirty. Angelina could have also been expressing her controversial opinion that black was in fact more beautiful and the white baby deserved no special attention. During slavery, "half-caste" babies were also physical embodiments of the rape of black women. Although Angelina may not have been raped, she may be responding negatively to the white woman asking her to approve of the symbolic action that produced the light-skinned baby. We cannot know Angelina's thoughts, but whatever her motivations were, she stood up to Mrs. Phelps and her intrusion.

Another common kind of female West Indian entrepreneur was the street vendor. Amos Clarke, a West Indian Canal worker, describes their work as part of his morning

routine: “In those days [the early years of construction], there were no restaurants. In the morning, two women of color would approach our place of work each one carrying a tray with hot coffee, bread and butter, selling them for ten cents. The names of these two Jamaican women were Mariam Cunningham and Caroline Lowe.”<sup>17</sup> Unlike Mrs. Phelps, Clarke gives these women their full names, granting them a degree of respect and agency. Some black women traveled through American neighborhoods, selling food to the housewives who would otherwise have had to travel quite far to the commissaries where the range of wares, particularly fresh produce, was limited because they were mostly stocked with imported American goods. Rose Van Hardeveld describes her first interaction with one of these salespeople, who later becomes her daily fruit provider: “A black woman of the ‘Fuzzy-Wuzzy’ tribe came to the door, bearing on her head a shallow wooden tray heaped high with oranges and bananas. Gladly I bought her luscious wares, a very satisfying addition to our breakfast.”<sup>18</sup> For Clarke and Rose, as for many other citizens of the Canal, West Indian saleswomen became essential to a daily routine. As with laundresses, food vendors had the power to choose their own customers, set their own paces and establish their prices.

“Huckstering” or “informal” street sales by black women was an established tradition across the Americas. Female slaves sold the masters’ products in earlier decades, and were often prized for their marketing skills. Slaves who were allowed to harvest their own food often grew a surplus to sell for extra money in the market.<sup>19</sup> By the mid-seventeenth century, shopkeepers and merchants in some places felt the competitive

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<sup>17</sup> Reyes Rivas, 148.

<sup>18</sup> Van Hardeveld, 27.

<sup>19</sup> Hilary Beckles, *Natural Rebels: A Social History of enslaved black women in Barbados* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 72.

threat of this practice and tried to bring it under legal control. In Barbados, there were several efforts to link huckstering to criminality in 1668, 1708 and 1733.<sup>20</sup> The practice did not become officially legal until 1794.<sup>21</sup> After emancipation, many black women continued in this trade using the skills that they already possessed. Women most often sold prepared foods, like sugar cakes, fritters, pepper sauces and cassava.<sup>22</sup> Already a common practice in the islands, huckstering translated easily to the Canal. American commissaries struggled to keep up with the demands of the ever growing towns and rarely stocked foods that West Indian workers preferred, so West Indian women filled this demand.

Independent West Indian saleswomen had to work long, arduous hours to make the lives of others easier as well as provide for themselves and their families. The first step in starting such a business would be to gather the products. Since they had no “official” provider, like the commissaries of the Zone, West Indian women either had to gather fruits and vegetables from naturally growing trees, harvest them in small farms or establish trustworthy farm contacts. From her porch, Rose Van Hardeveld could see a West Indian home at the edge of the jungle where “wild lemons, oranges, and other luscious fruit, rice and cassava grew in well-cared for profusion around the hut.”<sup>23</sup> Mariam Cunningham and Caroline Lowe must have woken up early in the morning to prepare bread and coffee for the Canal workers. The women carried their products on heavy trays or in sacks that they hauled around neighborhoods or city streets all day

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 75-76.

<sup>21</sup> Jessica B. Harris, “Same Boat, Different Stops: An African Atlantic Culinary Journey,” in *African Roots/American cultures: Africa in the creation of the Americas*, ed. Sheila S. Walker (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), 177.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 177-78.

<sup>23</sup> Van Hardeveld, 41.

under the burning sun. This job shows how black women improvised in the contact zone of the Canal, creating a space for themselves in the market by using the materials available to them and creating complex business relationships with other groups, such as the Chinese merchants of the Zone.

Another Maid in Panama story tells of an American woman's relationship to her daily vegetable vendor.<sup>24</sup> She calls the old Jamaican woman "the Hoo-Hoo lady," due to the energetic call she gives in the mornings to make her presence known, which sounds "somewhat like the call of a cookoo in the jungle." The Hoo-Hoo lady holds two jobs to support her large family—she sells vegetables "up and down Ancon Blvd...on the days that she doesn't wash clothes for her two or three costumers." The returns from selling are small, each tomato is ten cents, a small bag of green beans fifteen cents. The narrator notes that, despite the hard work, "Hoo-Hoo" always seems serene because she has become "inured to [the] disappointment" that must be an everyday part of her job. The story highlights the Hoo-Hoo lady's skill at selling her wares—the narrator cannot control herself from buying every time she comes around. The narrator even ponders that "Hoo-Hoo might have been a clever salesman of what the world considers its more important plunder," had she not been a black woman.<sup>25</sup>

The idea that the story of West Indian women in Panama is impossible to tell or unimportant to the principal story of the Canal because they were sequestered in American homes is incorrect. The work of laundresses and saleswomen shows that black women were actually highly visible in Canal society. Most of these women worked outside and interacted with a variety of people, providing essential services on a daily

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<sup>24</sup> Core, "Philosophy of Life," 1-5.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 5.

basis. They worked independently and had a certain level of authority over their bosses. Black women were central players in the contact zone of the Canal, creating links between different groups. Through the story of black women's labor—as saleswomen visiting the camps, groups of laundresses washing by the river, servants going to the shops—the Canal emerges as a complex society of interrelations rather than a labor camp.

In nineteenth-century Jamaica, colored women were the most common providers of hospitality.<sup>26</sup> According to Paulette Kerr in her essay “Victims or Strategists?: Female Lodging-House Keepers in Jamaica”, these colored women were often mistresses or prostitutes to white men who funded the establishment of their lodging houses.<sup>27</sup> They were often ostracized by the black community and white women, and were caught in a sexual bind with the white men who gave them financial assistance.<sup>28</sup> Yet many of them managed to break free of that cycle and gain economic independence. Civil court cases regarding a Jamaican woman named Jane Hall, a lodging-house keeper, show how this work translated to the Canal. Hall's cases provide a fuller picture of a highly visible West Indian female public figure.

Jane Hall lived close to the center of the Panama Canal Zone in the town of Culebra. Jane seems to have occupied a space at the center of the Canal Zone both geographically and philosophically, as the massive turnover of workers staying in her houses, the rapid settlement of communities around her and her complex interactions with the recently established court system exemplified the transition period of construction. The town was teeming with laborers working on one of the most dangerous sites in the

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<sup>26</sup> Paulette Kerr, “Victims or Strategists?: Female Lodging-House Keepers in Jamaica,” *Engendering History: Caribbean Women in Historical Perspective*, Eds. Verene Shepherd and Bridget Brereton (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 1995), 197.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 197.

Canal, the Culebra Cut, where the mountainous landscape posed a challenge to the Canal engineers who wished to join Gatun Lake with the Pacific Ocean. Hall chose a strategic site to set up a lodging-house, assuring that her business would grow. The areas surrounding Culebra often became dump sites, where workers placed the massive amounts of earth removed from the mountains.<sup>29</sup> Hall lived near the old French dump, in the new town of Culebra. By 1906, she owned two houses and was in the process of building a third.<sup>30</sup> Robert Newman, a contractor, describes one of the houses as having two floors, topped with zinc ceilings, and a veranda in front. Hall's properties served as boarding houses for the male Canal workers around Culebra. For a contract of \$12.00 Panamanian silver a month, Hall would rent a room with a bed, a dresser and sometimes an oven. The construction and repair of her various houses, as well as the interactions with her various boarders, brought her to the courts, usually in pursuit of unpaid debts. From 1906 to 1907, Hall participated in six cases brought to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Judicial Circuit Civil Court at Empire, making her one of the most frequent litigants in the area. Three cases deal with Hall's debt to builders contracted to repair and frame her properties, while the rest are debts tenants owed her. Hall provides an uncommon example of a documented West Indian businesswoman in the Panama Canal Zone. Her profession and interaction with the courts implies that Hall had a significant public role in Culebra society. West Indian women in Panama are commonly represented as merely service workers, rather than displaying the independent labor of washerwomen, food merchants and businesswomen like Jane Hall. Through the court records, Jane Hall presents an example

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<sup>29</sup> Ira E. Bennet, *History of the Panam Canal: Its Construction and Builders* (Washington, D.C.: Historical Publishing Company, 1915), 140.

<sup>30</sup> Robert Newman v Jane Hall (1907), Canal Zone 2<sup>nd</sup> Judicial Circuit Civil Court (Empire, Gorgona, Ancon). Civil Case Files, 1904-1914, Case 93.

of a West Indian woman who lived independently, worked outside the surveillance of a boss and sought financial stability through the legal system.

Hall brought her first case to the Empire court in March of 1906, against Jamaican Thomas Barton.<sup>31</sup> Barton had rented a baking oven owned by Hall for the sum of \$15.00 Panamanian silver a month during the previous year. According to Hall, the oven was given to Barton in perfect condition, but returned to her on April 26<sup>th</sup>, 1905 in a “broken and otherwise damaged condition” that rendered the oven useless.<sup>32</sup> Chief witness, Sam Lyons, who was present on the day Barton returned the oven to Hall, agreed that the oven was turned over and in very bad condition, not “as would happen from the usual use of the oven.”<sup>33</sup> In her initial complaint, Hall requests that Barton pay her the price of the oven along with damages resulting from not being able to rent it, to the total of \$150. In his response, Barton denies all of Hall's charges. The case file does not include any of Barton's evidence or witness statements, but the court eventually found in favor of the defendant, requiring Hall to pay Barton's court and lawyer fees. Though she lost this case, Jane showed intelligence and familiarity with the legal system. With the court date set to April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1906 and all the witnessed subpoenaed, Jane made a request to take the testimony of Frank Lyons before the actual court date, since he was departing the area before that, therefore adding a witness favorable to her cause at the last minute. The case shows the beginning of Jane's entrepreneurial pursuits, renting out her baking oven. It also marks the beginning of her significant public presence within the mostly male business and legal community of Culebra. Jane Hall was the first West Indian woman to

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<sup>31</sup> Jane Hall v Thomas Barton (1906), Canal Zone 2<sup>nd</sup> Judicial Circuit Civil Court (Empire, Gorgona, Ancon). Civil Case Files, 1904-1914, Case 36.

<sup>32</sup> Hall v Barton (1906), Petition.

<sup>33</sup> Hall v Barton (1906), Witness Examination of Sam Lyon.

bring a case to the Canal Courts to protect her business interests.

Most inhabitants of the Canal Zone lived in worker housing provided by the Canal authorities. American visitors would often stay in elegant hotels such as the Tivoli, built specially for President Theodore Roosevelt's visit to the Canal in 1906. But West Indian workers, forced to inhabit low quality housing in deplorable conditions and eat bad food due to the de facto segregation of the roll system, often sought other forms of housing. In a hearing before the Senate, the first Chief Engineer of the Canal project, John F. Wallace admits that "we were never able to house the Negroes" (though his reasoning deflects questions about the subpar conditions provided for West Indian workers).<sup>34</sup> He explained the difficulty of running a boarding house for West Indian male workers: "if we got a man to keep a boarding house, and he boarded our employees, he had to run the risk of collecting their board, you understand, from the men. If they suddenly took a notion to go home, and left the Isthmus, and left that board uncollected, the keeper of the boarding house would lose that money."<sup>35</sup> Due to the high turnover and desertions of black workers, running a boarding house was not a financially stable enterprise, even for the American government companies. Nevertheless, Jane Hall took it upon herself to provide this service, realizing the need for such a service and the potential benefits for herself.

Hall's next three cases deal with the construction and repair of her properties. On August 6, 1906, Hall hired the contractor, Rufus Melhado, to begin work on one of her houses.<sup>36</sup> He signed a contract describing the labor required for Hall's future boarding

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<sup>34</sup> John F. Wallace, "Summary of Work on Panama Canal—July 1, 1904—June 30, 1905," *Investigation of Panama Canal Matters, Hearings before the Committee on Interoceanic Canals of the United States, Vol. 1* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1907), 620. [Available on Google Books]

<sup>35</sup> Wallace, 620.

<sup>36</sup> Rufus Melhado v Jane Hall (1906), Canal Zone 2<sup>nd</sup> Judicial Circuit Civil Court (Empire, Gorgona, Ancon). Civil Case Files, 1904-1914, Case 62.

house: a 80 x 30 two floor, with seventeen doors and seven windows, with independent rooms on the top floor and partitions on the ground floor. The contract stipulated that Jane would pay Melhado “money according to work advance every two weeks,” and complete the balance when he finished the construction.<sup>37</sup> After working on the house for a while, Rufus sued Jane for debt in the Municipal court of Culebra, claiming that she had not paid any of the installments promised. Jane, on the other hand, countered that Rufus had not finished the construction and having left the house in an unfinished state, should not expect payment. The court interviewed witnesses and sent an inspector to the house, who revealed that Melhado had, in fact, left the house “insecure” and not “worth any value.” After much deliberation and “heated discussion between the contestants,” the municipal court gave judgment in favor of Melhado in the sum of \$125.00 Panamanian silver. Hall immediately asked for an appeal, which was to take place in the circuit court of Empire.

Meanwhile, Melhado investigated Hall's properties to inform the court about Hall's wealth:

“I have been around and found that she owns two houses and one just being framed:

House No. 105	20 x 36	\$500.00
House No. 114	14 x 20	\$350.00
One house frame	37 x 80	\$200.00” <sup>38</sup>

By the fall of 1906, Hall already owned two properties and was in the process of building a third, the largest and most expensive, with space for around 10 rooms and worth more than \$500.00. By the fall of 1906, Hall already owned a established business which apparently was financially successful, since she could afford a costly expansion.

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<sup>37</sup> Melhado v Hall (1906), Exhibit A: Contract

<sup>38</sup> Melhado v Hall (1906), Letter from Rufus Melhado to His Honour Mr. Ross, Municipal Judge, Empire (September 15, 1906)

Hall's already sizeable fortune in 1906 raises the question of her background before the American Canal. Though one case states she is from Jamaica, it does not include any other biographical information. Jane could have arrived in Panama decades before, during the French construction. Maybe she was an agricultural worker, like many female immigrants of the time, and arrived in Panama to save up money by working as a domestic, laundress or saleswoman. She started small, renting out one room, eventually building her business. More plausible is the possibility that Jane could have already been a mixed-race businesswoman in Jamaica, or at least have had enough money to cover the start-up costs of her boarding house. Taking advantage of the economic situation in the Canal and sensing the need for worker housing, especially for West Indians, Jane could have traveled to Panama to establish a boarding house. If she was one of these women Kerr discusses, Hall might have been escaping the bonds tying her to a white man who supported her business. Hall's possible background expand the portrait of West Indian women in the Canal, showing that educated, perhaps middle-class women of color migrated to Panama and succeeded in reaching economic independence.

During the appeal, presided over by the same judge who dealt with Jane in the case against Barton, the court once again found the case in favor of Melhado. However, the damages were assessed at a much lower value, granting Melhado only \$25.00 Panamanian silver plus court fees around \$13.00. Though she lost the case, Hall was willing to manipulate the judicial system, forcing Melhado into an appeal case for which he showed up without a representing lawyer. Also importantly, Jane had the money to continue these procedures. Every case required large court fees, a cash deposit for appeals, and lawyer salaries, along with the potential financial loss resulting from the

case judgment.

A few months later, Hall was back in court as the defendant in a case brought by another builder, William Turner. On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of January, 1907, Hall and Turner entered into a contract stipulating that Hall would pay Turner \$800.00 in installments for the construction of a house according to her specifications.<sup>39</sup> The house was to be similar in size to the one begun by Melhado, a two story 80 x 36 feet. It may be that Hall contracted Turner to rebuild what Melhado had left, or that she was building yet another house. The upstairs would contain sixteen rooms, each with one door and one window. The downstairs would include four rooms, with two double doors and two windows. The contract also required Hall to provide Turner with material needed for the building five weeks before construction started.

After five weeks, the house remained unfinished. According to Hall, Turner had started his work but so far, the house was “entirely worthless and unserviceable.”<sup>40</sup> Hall hired an outside carpenter to determine “wherein said house had failed.” Turner refused to meet with Hall and the carpenter. After the carpenter found some errors in the balconies, Turner still refused to continue work on Hall's house. Hall sent a letter to Turner demanding he fix the balconies. In the letter, she displays her determination, using the official outside sources she sought to imbue her argument with more authority: “I am hereby authorized by the Zone competent Carpenters to notify you within the period of three days from date to have the balcony...replaced.”<sup>41</sup> After several days without a response, Hall decided to turn to another carpenter to finish the necessary work. Turner

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<sup>39</sup> William Turner v Jane Hall (1907), Canal Zone 2<sup>nd</sup> Judicial Circuit Civil Court (Empire, Gorgona, Ancon). Civil Case Files, 1904-1914, Case 91.

<sup>40</sup> Turner v Hall (1907),

<sup>41</sup> Turner v Hall (1907), Exhibit B for Defendant: Letter from Jane Hall to William Turner (April 17, 1907).

later alleged that during this ordeal, Hall failed to furnish the material necessary to continue the job and, like Melhado, had not paid him several installments, amounting to \$260.00. In his view, all the work was completed successfully except for the balconies, which he considered to be Hall's fault.

During trial, on June 4<sup>th</sup>, 1907. Turner complained that Hall refused to pay him the last of his installments. Hall, in rebuttal, used a similar argument to the one she used against Melhado, alleging that Turner had not only left the work unfinished, but that the work that had been done was of inferior quality and she "should not be called upon to pay for this." The court decided both parties had failed to fulfill the expectations set forth in the contract. Hall had to pay \$50.00 to Turner, an amount much lower than the balance left on the contract, and each party had to pay their own court fees. Hall clearly shows a command of the court bureaucracy. She has several witnesses, including the professional carpenter, and an archived paper trail, including the original contract and the letters she sent Turner.

Unfortunately, Hall's next carpenter, whom she hired to replace Turner, also did not work out. By August of the same year, Hall was back in court as a defendant in a case brought by Robert Newman.<sup>42</sup> He was the third carpenter in a row to sue Hall in Civil Court for this construction. Though each complained about missing payments, money was not the only issue. In every case, she had paid a large (though insufficient) portion of the amount settled in the contract. She had also paid each carpenter, and every court fee, a considerable expense. She must have known that, if she missed the payments she had set out in the contract, she would be brought to court again. Why did Jane Hall miss her payments, knowing it would lead her to another court battle? Moreover, as a resident of

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<sup>42</sup> Newman v Hall (1907)

Culebra, her cases were always presided over by the same judge, the Honorable H.A. Gudger and the previous plaintiffs served as witnesses against her. As a third time defendant in virtually identical cases, she must have suspected that the odds were against her, as the judge was well aware of her previous court battles, none of which she had outright won. Nevertheless, Hall stood up to every carpenter. One possibility is that Hall was an excellent strategist and this ordeal actually put her in a better financial position. Thought she never won, none of the court cases required her to pay the full amount the plaintiffs demanded. Hall usually ended up paying much less than the amount agreed upon in the contract, and could then terminate said contract and seek another carpenter to continue the job.

The Newman case is similar to the Melhado and Turner cases before it. A carpenter complained to the court that Jane Hall ignored the terms of the contract by refusing to pay part of the agreed upon sum. Hall retorted that the work was either incomplete or of bad quality and thus deserved no pay. Also similar to the Turner case, Newman was unprepared next to Hall. Newman was unable to present a copy of the contract as the evidence on which he bases his argument. Hall, as in every other case, had the original contract.

This is the longest case so far, with the most witnesses, a move from the Municipal to the Civil Court and an appeal. Clearly at this point the court was more hostile to Hall as a repeat offender. One of the witnesses even called attention to this by sending a letter to the Judge, reminding him of “the numbers of cases” Hall had brought to the court in which he had already participated as a witness and for which he had not

received compensation.<sup>43</sup> The case turned out badly for Hall. Judge Gudger ruled in favor of Newman and required her to pay him \$100.00, along with court fees and an extra \$3.50 as the cost of acting as a witness in the case of Hall v. Turner, which she also had not paid him. The case must have been a financial setback for Jane, since on August 30<sup>th</sup>, 10 days after the ruling, the court clerk sent a letter to the Marshal of the Circuit Court demanding that he force Jane to pay the amount ordered, with interest for the late days, or else to take command of her land and buildings.

In between the Turner and Newman cases, during April of 1907, Jane was also involved as plaintiff in a case against a former boarder, China Byasta.<sup>44</sup> In her complaint, Jane explains that China rented a room from her for November of 1906 until February 1907. He paid rent of \$12.00 silver for the first month, but then vacated the room in mid-December without giving any notice or rent money. In view of this, Byasta said in his response, Hall placed a lock on the room and refused to let him back in, even to collect his belongings. Hall requested the full payment promised for the four months of rental. Byasta countered that he would have paid, had he not been locked out of his room, and requested \$200.00 in physical and psychological damages.

During the case, both William Turner and Robert Newman were called as witnesses. During the last two years, Jane Hall must have appeared in the same court almost every month to deal with seven cases, two appeals and the numerous documents and fees that had to be presented and processed for each. In fact, these cases underestimate how much she actually dealt with the legal system of the Canal, since she

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<sup>43</sup> Turner v Hall (1907), Letter from subpoenaed witness Julius E. Cose to Judge (Empire, August 13, 1907)

<sup>44</sup> Jane Hall v China Byasta (1907), Canal Zone 2<sup>nd</sup> Judicial Circuit Civil Court (Empire, Gorgona, Ancon). Civil Case Files, 1904-1914, Case 89.

also often showed up at the Municipal Court. At the time of this case, she must have known everyone in the courthouse, including the judge. She also knew the witnesses—they were ex-plaintiffs of her past cases. The whole town of Culebra was probably well aware of Hall's legal issues, since she had housed many workers of the area and contracted a number of carpenters. Her constant litigation must have been considered somewhat of a nuisance, but she was also respected as a business-owner who clearly had legitimate reasons to come to court. As a colored woman, Hall might have been treated scornfully by the West Indian communities around her and the West Indian carpenters and boarders who came into her lodging house. At the end of April, Judge Gudger finally ruled in favor of Hall, ordering Byasta to pay part of the rent owed along with the court fees related to the case.

Jane Hall's situation raises some questions about class tensions among West Indian migrants to Panama in the early twentieth century. West Indian immigrants to the Canal are generally considered to have come from the lower strata of Caribbean society, mostly uneducated peasants. The most extensive class analysis in the literature is the difference between Barbadian and Jamaican immigrants. Barbadians were more likely to be from the lower class, since they did not have to pay an emigration tax and the ICC usually funded their travel, whereas Jamaican immigrants, who had to pay an emigration tax, were likely from the “artisan” or lower-middle class. Though this distinction has some truth to it, it barely skims the surface of West Indian class backgrounds. Usually, it was people from the “up-and-coming” classes that emigrated from the West Indies, seeking economic opportunities unavailable in the islands. Moreover, migration requires some degree of economic stability, as it is a risky action. Migrants had to leave their

home, their families, and their contacts, to move to a new place, often with no promise of work. It is unlikely that only West Indians from the lower classes migrated to Panama. Part of the misunderstanding about West Indians and class in Panama is due to the American interpretation of the squalor of West Indian communities. Migrants were not all as destitute as the squalid conditions under which they were forced to live might have suggested. They often sent remittances back to the islands and would later return and use “Panama money” to buy properties or land. People like Jane Hall, along with the teachers, shopkeepers and other members of the burgeoning West Indian middle-class in Panama have been overlooked by Canal historians. A class analysis of the migrants’ background especially during the early years of construction could illuminate the rise of Garveyism and labor radicalism in the Isthmus some years later.<sup>45</sup>

Jane Hall is the extreme example of an independent entrepreneur, able to exert her authority even through official channels. At the other extreme were the women who traveled to Panama and had to live under direct surveillance of the state. The Isthmian Canal Commission hired some West Indian women directly to work as laundresses, janitors, cooks and servants for Canal services such as the hotels, hospitals and commissaries as well as for a few prestigious teaching positions. The ICC employed only seventy West Indian or South American women in 1912, according to the government census.<sup>46</sup> West Indian women who chose to work for the Commission received major benefits—higher pay, higher social status, respected references. On the other hand, the Commission also kept tabs on these women, patrolling their morality and behavior. Single women had to live in all-female housing camps, guarded by Canal policemen who

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<sup>45</sup> Winston James, Holding aloft the banner of Ethiopia. Maloney, *El Canal de Panamá y los trabajadores antillanos : Panamá 1920 : cronología de una lucha*

<sup>46</sup> Greene, 257.

enforced a strict curfew.

Teaching was the highest-paid and most well-regarded position for West Indians in the Canal. Most black teachers in the Zone were men. Teaching was an option for only a very small number of black women. Schools were segregated, with West Indians teaching all-black classes.<sup>47</sup> Most of the teaching jobs went to Jamaicans, who were perceived as having been better educated than other West Indians. The largest black school was in Cristobal, where an all-black male staff taught, but there were fifteen other schools spread around the Zone.<sup>48</sup> A teacher's salary ranged from around \$25.00 to \$35.00 in gold, a currency that immediately signified a higher social status. The classrooms were usually housed in large barn-like buildings, with all instruction taking place in one classroom, regardless of grade. The teacher-student ratio for black children was disproportionately high in comparison to that in the white schools: black teacher had an average of 40 or more students, whereas white teachers had around 24 students per classroom.

Table 1: Teacher-Student Ratio in Canal Zone				
Year	White Teachers	White Students	Black Teachers	Black Students
1908	23	721	20	2146
1909	37	745	21	1067
1910	40	931	25	906
1911	45	1076	27	903
1912	48	1157	28	1042

Source: Eyra Marcela Reyes Rivas, *El Trabajo de las mujeres en la historia de la construccion del Canal de Panama, 1881-1914* (Panama: Universidad de Panama, Instituto de la Mujer, 2000), 140.

<sup>47</sup> Info about future of the school system: Westerman, The West Indian worker on the Canal Zone, Allen Glenn Morton, *The private schools of the British West Indians in Panama* and Alda Alexander Harper, *Tracing the course of growth and development in educational policy for the Canal Zone colored schools, 1905-1955*.

<sup>48</sup> Canal Record, Vol 3, Page 86, 1910

Non-residents of the Zone, even if they were the sons or daughters of Canal workers, were not allowed to attend Zone schools.<sup>49</sup> West Indian schools only taught 1<sup>st</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> grades and the curriculum attempted to prepare these children for a life of work in the Canal.<sup>50</sup> The course of study laid “more stress on industrial than cultural work.”<sup>51</sup> Teachers taught the traditional lessons of reading, writing, spelling and arithmetic alongside classes on hygiene, agriculture and horticulture. The Commission Reports contain a lot of information about schools in the Canal, but there are no personal stories of the West Indian women who taught there. West Indian female teachers gained more money and social status from their jobs than most other black women in the Canal. These women probably formed the basis of the West Indian middle-class in Panama.

The best documented instance of the Commission hiring West Indian women is the infamous investigation about Martiniquean women and prostitution in 1906. Early in 1905, the Isthmian Canal Commission sent agents to Martinique to recruit women for the various positions of unskilled non-Canal labor that had been created in the Zone. The Commission had only hired male laborers so far, as most West Indian women traveled independently. But the opening of numerous hotels, hospitals, commissaries, and other facilities of “civilized” life, along with the settlement of American neighborhoods required a large number of laborers for what was seen as “female” work—domestic servants, nurses and laundresses. Many of the women spoke of Mr. Lavenel, the Commission recruiting agent in Martinique who promised them that there was plenty of work to be had in the Canal for women. The information spread through word of mouth and, in November 1905, the steamship *Floridian* left Martinique for Colon with 650

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<sup>49</sup> Lewis, 55.

<sup>50</sup> Lewis, 54.

<sup>51</sup> Canal Record, Vol 3, Page 86, 1910

passengers, of which 280 were women.

The unprecedented step of recruiting West Indian women and paying for their passage raised some eyebrows in the Canal community, and rumors began to circulate that they had been brought for immoral purposes. The official trouble began with a visit to the Canal from Poultney Bigelow, a New York journalist wishing to report on the status of West Indian workers in the Zone. His article in the New York Herald claimed that “On the occasion of my visit the clergy of the Isthmus were loud in protest because the United States authorities had imported at considerable expense several hundreds of colored ladies. Prostitutes are not needed on the Isthmus; if they were there is no call to send for them at the expense of the taxpayer. They may be trusted to come without any special assistance whenever Colon clamors for kindred consolation.”<sup>52</sup> Bigelow's article also decried the abominable conditions of all West Indian workers: “Colon to-day is mainly a swamp, into which is dumped all the human excrement of the negro population and where this population is compelled to sleep.”<sup>53</sup> Bigelow's article created an uproar both in the U.S. and the Canal Zone. President Roosevelt ordered a full Senate investigation of the affair, including interviews with Bigelow, all the high-ranking members of religious groups in the Zone who Bigelow had individually called out as having known about the women coming as prostitutes, the senior officers of the Commission and most of the women who had traveled on the ship.

By the start of the investigation, two months after the article appeared, the Martiniquean women who had arrived in Panama had settled into their new lives. Most

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<sup>52</sup> U.S. Senate, *Investigation of Panama Canal Matters: Hearings before the United States Senate on Interoceanic Canals*, Vol. 1-4. 59<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2<sup>nd</sup> Session, 1907, 933.

<sup>53</sup> Poultney Bigelow, “Poultney Bigelow Reaffirms his criticisms of the Canal work,” *New York Times* (Friday January 12, 1906): 8 [Available online: <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=9D00E4DD103EE733A25751C1A9679C946797D6CF>]

had found jobs as domestics, washerwomen or hotel servants. Two worked at the local cantina, two in the commissary and one waitressed and cleaned at a restaurant. About half of them were married and had moved in with their husbands. The investigation publicly exposed the already acknowledged known and widespread practice of common-law marriage among West Indians, which was seen as highly immoral but unavoidable. The single women were placed in camps at Pedro Miguel, Bas Obispo, Culebra and Paraiso. The women were housed in large, one-story buildings, where watchmen and policemen patrolled their behavior, enforcing a 8:30 pm curfew on weekdays and 9:00 pm on Sundays. One of the women, Rose Mont Rose, explains that they were given an ultimatum: “I was told when I came here by the watchman at Bas Obispo that I must either be married, have work, or leave the camp, as they wanted no single women here unless they were working.”<sup>54</sup> Whereas most black women traveling to the Canal had the freedom to choose their living arrangements and situate themselves within established West Indian communities, the Commission established a stringent standard of behavior for the women who traveled under their authority. Single black women were considered dangerous for labor productivity and damaging to the image of the Canal. Unless they were somehow providing something to the Canal, usually in the domestic realm, whether in their own homes (if they were married) or those of Americans, black women were considered an inconvenience.

The prosecuting attorney of the Canal, J.M. Keedy, “went to the places where these women were living, conversed with them, and reduced their statements to the form of an affidavit,” gathering 167 statements from West Indian women as part of the investigation. Keedy reports that, during his visits, women were fearful of deportation

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<sup>54</sup> Investigation, 941

and many of them “became greatly excited, shed tears and were palpably alarmed.”<sup>55</sup> Their placement in strict housing camps, the visit from a Canal official, and the intense questioning must have been a profoundly confusing experience for the women who had only two months before been strongly encouraged to travel to Panama, where they were promised jobs and a bright future.

The affidavits all follow a similar pattern from which the questions can be discerned. The women had to state their names, birthplaces, marital status, living conditions and current form of employment. They also had to describe the process of getting to the Canal—who hired them and what exactly they had been promised. Keedy also asked the women whether their job, wages and living conditions were satisfactory. Despite their emotional response to the stress of the investigation, the affidavits were quite homogeneous, as if all the women had repeated the exact same phrases—their situation was “satisfactory”, they were “doing well”. Through leading questions and later editing of the affidavits, Keedy influenced the women's responses. But if none of the reviews of their living conditions are overwhelmingly negative, neither are they positive or excited. Some women managed to voice their dislike of the situation. Alfonce Ustach said that “a watchman is over us all night,” a constant surveillance that she found unnecessary as she was 69 years old and considered all of the women in the camp respectful and moral.<sup>56</sup> Leona Lewis complained “no one ever told me I had to have a husband” and expressed her distaste for the Canal government's intrusion into her personal life. Alexandria Picquot was the only one of the women, barring the sick, who did not have a steady job. In her affidavit, she spoke of her dissatisfaction with the

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid, 932.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 960

unfulfilled promise of the Canal Zone—"Came here to work, as I heard there was plenty. Mr. Lavenel (recruiting agent) told me. I have not found all the work I could do."<sup>57</sup> Though they were put through a stressful investigation by a powerful institution, these West Indian women expressed their concerns and criticized the handling of the situation and the assumptions the US government was making about them.

Many of the Martiniquean women worked as domestic servants in American homes. The Baptist minister J.L. Wise, for example, spoke of hiring two of the women in his affidavit during the investigation. Though they did not live in a camp, the women's behavior and morals were still evaluated—"both these women came under the constant observation of affiant and his wife and were found to be neat, orderly and excellent servants, and of good moral character."<sup>58</sup> A couple of domestic servants and one washerwoman mentioned that they gained \$20.00 a month working in these households. Though the bulk of West Indian women in the Canal worked for middle-class American employers, many of the women who were part of the investigation were hired by families with high profile positions in Canal society such as the telegraph operator or the ministers. This might have been due to the publicity surrounding the investigation or because the Commission had approved them and deemed them respectable. Their salaries were more than twice as high as those of the women hired as hotel servants. These women not only gained more money than most West Indian women, their salaries equaled those of West Indian men. Their position inside these executive's homes also gave them social capital—they knew important people and probably gained some unique skills or knowledge.

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 959

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 937.

The details of these stories revise historical knowledge on what West Indian women were doing in the Panama Canal Zone, showing the diversity of their activities through individual stories. West Indian women often interacted with white Americans on a personal level, as domestics or service workers. In their jobs, black women had to deal with the authoritative surveillance of their bosses. On the other hand, many of these women engaged in entrepreneurial activities which gave them financial and social independence. While West Indian men worked for the Canal, some West Indian women were building labor practices that could continue after construction ended, cementing the settlement of West Indian communities separate from the American administration.

## Chapter 3

### “Woman a heavy load”: Family and the Expectations of Femininity

Woman a heavy load, hi  
Woman a heavy load, hi  
Woman a heavy load.  
O wen Satidey mornin' com, hi  
Wen de money no nuff, hi (bis X 3)  
Wah dem neva go out com back.  
Wen de money nuff, hi (bis X 3)  
Den dey call you honey comb, hi.  
Wen de money nuff, hi  
Why dey call yo sugar stick, hi  
Call you sugar stick, hi  
Call you sugar stick, hi  
Wah wen de money nuff.<sup>1</sup>

In “Woman a Heavy Load,” West Indian men sing about their expectations of a relationship. The song is part of a misogynist genre of male work songs that present black women as only interested in money—they will provide sex only after men provide them with money. Men, then, are supposed to provide financial support for women. Its use as a work song amplifies this meaning, as men sing the song while hoping to produce “nuff money.” But though men make the money, women make the choice to be with them and start families. In fact, women have the sexual upper-hand, as they are the ones who “call you sugar stick.” This song, of course, tells only part of the story. The details of the familial and sexual relationships of West Indian women in the first decade of the construction of the Canal can be found in numerous civil court cases regarding divorce and insanity. The court cases extend and further problematize the image of family relations represented in “Woman a heavy load.” The cases show that the forces shaping

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<sup>1</sup> Louise Cramer, “Songs of West Indian Negroes in the Canal Zone,” *California Folklore Quarterly*, Vol 5, No. 3 (July 1946): 243-272. Page 256.

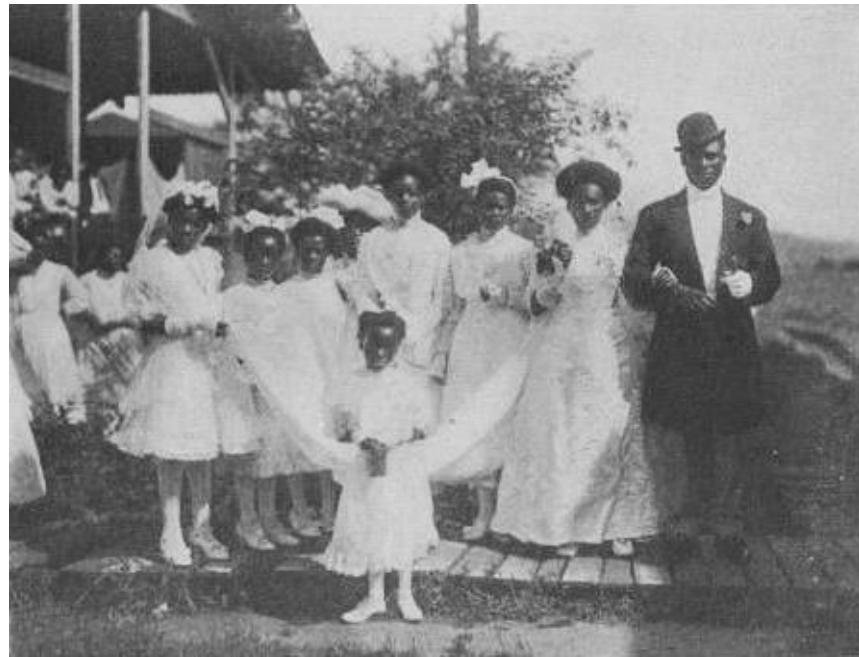
family relationships among West Indians in the Canal Zone were as complex as the society itself, influenced by the availability and quality of job opportunities for men and women, the attitudes of the state, and diverse sexual and marital standards. West Indian women had to carefully navigate the societal expectations of femininity enforced by husbands, family and the government. Divorce cases show the ways West Indian women manipulated the American system to gain more freedoms and how they navigated the “contact zone” of the Canal, as they took advantage of the openness of the courts in the early years of construction. Insanity cases show how West Indian families dealt with women whose actions went past the limit of “acceptable” behavior that the openness of the courts allowed.

West Indian couples in Panama eschewed marriage in part because the Church and State fees made it prohibitively expensive. This meant that couples in the Canal who wanted to be legally married were only able to do so if they had either some level of financial security or had saved money specifically for the purpose of getting married. Many West Indian couples had married before coming to Panama. The practice of marriage was not common in Panamanian West Indian communities, but when it did occur, the marriage ritual was considered an important social occasion. An American man invited as a guest to the wedding of Jamaicans Mose and Mariah comments that these ceremonies required a lot of money “In order to do it up brown, as a “wedding” and not just a marriage.”<sup>2</sup> Men dressed in black suits and silk hats and the women in white, while the bride wore a sweeping satin gown. People would stand on their balconies and doorways to watch the festivities. Accounts of West Indian couples' elaborate wedding ceremonies contradict the stories of pervasive poverty through which contemporary

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<sup>2</sup> Core, “The Tie that Binds,” 18.

American traveler accounts and the ICC characterized West Indian communities. Clearly some West Indians had enough money to celebrate lavishly. Middle-class West Indians were probably used to these kinds of wedding ceremonies. These ceremonies also display West Indians' commitment to staying in Panama, and building communities there.



West Indian Marriage in Panama  
Willis John Abbott, *Panama and the Canal in picture and prose*  
(New York: Syndicate Publishing Company, 1913), 235.

Divorces required even more money than marriages in order to pay the required attorney fees and court taxes. Given the cost of both, it was less likely for lower-class West Indian couples to marry and therefore to obtain a divorce. Most men involved in the divorce cases on record worked as regular I.C.C. laborers, except for Alfred White, a Zone policeman, and Alfred Meltz, a jeweler.<sup>3</sup> The case files rarely list the women's employment except for two who worked as domestics. Many of the West Indian women

<sup>3</sup> Only one case deals with the divorce between a Jamaican black woman and a white American man. The wife requested an annulment, since the marriage ceremony was not performed in compliance with the Panama Civil Code, and she had suffered some abuse. Gertrude A. Hale v Alva Eslie Hale (190, Canal Zone Third Judicial Circuit Court (Cristobal), Civil Case Files, 1905-1914, Case 45.

who acted as complainants in divorce cases submitted affidavits testifying to their impoverishment and requesting that their husbands promise to pay the court fees. Certainly West Indian women were not completely dependent on their husbands for their finances, but the Courts acting on patriarchal models treated them as such. Thus, it was to the women's benefit to present themselves as poor, fulfilling the court's expectations and arousing their pity, if they wished to receive alimony from the divorce settlement.

The ten divorce cases on record are evenly spread between the First and Third Judicial Circuits, with only one from the Second Circuit. The First circuit served Colon and the Third was close to Panama City, the two cities with the biggest West Indian communities. The cases are also evenly spread throughout the years of 1905 to 1914, meaning West Indians began to petition for divorce from the first years of migration. The civil code of the Canal describes the mix of legal precedent that the courts were drawing from in their decisions on divorce. Divorces were generally considered under U.S. law. If the marriage had taken place in Panama before it became U.S. territory, the divorce would follow Panamanian law. Moreover, "Marriages celebrated in [any foreign country not US territory] may be annulled in [US territory--i.e. the Canal], and the spouses may be separated by divorce, for causes which authorize dissolution and divorce, according to the laws of the State where the marriage was contracted."<sup>4</sup> In practice, most American courts used Anglican law as precedent, where men could divorce their wives if the women had committed adultery, but not vice versa. Every other case was resolved through legal separation, though women usually had to present several grounds, of which financial non-support was the strongest. The court granted divorces *a mensa et thoro*,

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<sup>4</sup> *The Code of Civil Procedure of the Canal Zone* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1907), 274.

meaning “from bed and board”, which were actually legal separations. This legally distinguished the couple as being apart, but neither party was allowed to remarry until the other died and the man remained financially responsible for the wife. Catholics could not petition the court for divorce. Instead, ecclesiastical tribunals had exclusive authority over the marital status of Catholics.<sup>5</sup>

In Canal divorce cases among West Indians, the complainant is usually the wife. In court, women invariably said they sought legal separations because they perceived their husbands as shirking from their most important duty in a marriage, providing income. Though this may have been a reason in some cases, it seems the women presented this reason to the courts because it gave them more legitimacy. The courts viewed women as financially dependent on their husbands and were sympathetic to this plea. Black women took advantage of this new option to obtain a greater degree of autonomy. By petitioning the court for divorce, black women could free themselves from bad marriages, seek sexual liberation or escape from domestic violence.

Violence is present in almost every case, although it was seldom the single factor that brought West Indian women to the threshold of tolerance for their partners. Women sought divorce for abuse when there were threats of murder or physical attacks that had a considerable and easily measured effect, such as a hospital or police visit. Nevertheless, West Indian women were more likely than white American women to cite domestic violence as a reason for seeking a divorce.<sup>6</sup> The few men who sought divorce did so out of sexual jealousy, accusing their wives of adultery or sexual insults. Except for two dismissals due to death and residency status, the Circuit Courts of the Canal granted

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<sup>5</sup> *The Code of Civil Procedure of the Canal Zone*, Art 1504, 274.

<sup>6</sup> Greene, 263.

every divorce requested by a West Indian couple.

Annie and Helon Sparks moved to Panama in the early years of construction from Jamaica and Trinidad, respectively.<sup>7</sup> They met in Panama and married in St. Luke's Church in Ancon in December 1908. In her petition for divorce four years later, Annie complained that Helon had a difficult temperament and frequently became violent and abusive towards her. One day during June of 1910, while Annie was in the second trimester of pregnancy, Helon became extremely violent and repeatedly beat and insulted her and gave her a black eye, until the police rushed into the house and separated them. Two months later, with the baby's birth near, Helon decamped to Limon, Costa Rica taking all the couples' money. He returned to the Canal after neglecting Annie for two years and got a new job, but still refused to support his wife. The proceedings are not documented, but the judge granted the divorce and ordered Helon to pay all court fees along with \$100.00 of child support to Annie.

Eugenia Peters had similar complaints to those of Annie Sparks. Eugenia, from Martinique, and Arthur, from Trinidad, also married in St. Luke's Church at Ancon in 1910.<sup>8</sup> Afterward, Arthur got a job as a Canal Zone police officer. Throughout their married life, Arthur repeatedly beat Eugenia, but it was not until January of 1913 that Eugenia reached a breaking point. One day, Arthur beat Eugenia so badly that he caused severe abdominal pains and Eugenia was forced to seek medical assistance she could not afford. Arthur then deserted Eugenia, taking all their money, and leaving her in an empty room with the rent due. Soon he was living in open concubinage with another woman,

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<sup>7</sup> Annie Sparks v Helon Sparks (1912), Canal Zone First Judicial Circuit Court (Balboa), Civil Case Files, 1905-1914, Case 133.

<sup>8</sup> Eugenia Peters v Arthur Peters (1913), Canal Zone First Judicial Circuit Court (Balboa), Civil Case Files, 1905-1914, Case 163.

Aurelia DuFot, who was pregnant with his child. He objected to Eugenia's complaints only on a technicality—the fact that they lived in Panama City, rather than the Zone. But the court overruled him because his job in the Canal Zone police force qualified him for residence. Though Eugenia had reasonable cause for action, the couple settled out of court. The divorce was granted and Eugenia received a monthly \$10.00 alimony as well as a large part of the court fees from Arthur.

Though Arthur was adulterous, this alone was insufficient grounds to request a divorce. More significant is his financial neglect of Eugenia which could easily be translated into a financial solution by the courts. The abuse, though it had continued for many years of their marriage, was significant in court only when it could be quantified by the medical bills. The same happens with Annie and Helon Sparks. He abused her for many years, but it was his financial desertion of her two years after the beating incident that allowed her to seek a divorce.

Women's spousal obligations, at least from the court's perspectives, required only that they take care of children and remain faithful. Richard Lewis is one of the few West Indian men who initiated a divorce. His complaint shows what constituted a sufficient cause of action to request a legal separation from his spouse.<sup>9</sup> He married Felicia in Jamaica in 1899, but left her there for Limon a year later. He sent remittances to her throughout the years, but never returned to Jamaica and instead moved to Panama to find more work. Five years later, Felicia also moved to the Panama with her six children, but did not contact Richard. He heard of her arrival and went to confront her. On his visit, Felicia tells him she did not travel to Panama to be with him, and that she has a child

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<sup>9</sup> Richard Lewis v. Felicia Lewis (1905), Canal Zone Third Judicial Circuit Court (Cristobal), Civil Case Files, 1904-1913, Case 15.

from another man. Presumably, Felicia moved to Panama partly because she had been left alone with many children to take care of and needed work. Though somewhat driven by financial need, Felicia was also expressing her independence from the expectations that she settle down or commit to one husband by traveling to Panama alone with her children and remaining indifferent to Richard's demands. Five years after Richard abandoned her in Jamaica, Felicia took matters into her own hands and migrated to find a better life for her family. Richard requested a divorce and asked for custody of the five children he has fathered. Unfortunately, Richard died at Colon Hospital before the case went to trial, so it is impossible to know what the state's response to his claims would have been. However, considering how much he had invested in the divorce, he probably had good reason to think that her adultery would be enough to grant him the divorce and custody.

Though the women never cited abuse as the sole cause of divorce, violence was present in almost every case. None of the women seemed to consider domestic violence exceptional, at least in front of the courts. This may be because they thought the court would not be sympathetic to the plight of an abused black woman and would only grant a divorce if they presented financial reasons. From this admittedly small sample, it seems that domestic violence might have been considered a common part of married life for West Indians. Such violence did not stem solely from men. In court, many husbands complained of violence from their wives. West Indian women were not deferential, and would respond to spousal abuse with verbal insults, hurled objects or the even more powerful weapon of gossip. Despite their physical, economic, and legal disadvantages, West Indian women were ready to stand their ground.

A good example of this can be seen in the 1912 divorce case of Courtney and

Mary Black, the longest divorce case of the early decade of the Canal.<sup>10</sup> Their numerous complaints and cross-complaints build a complex story of adultery, abuse and deceit. Courtney and Mary were married in the Gatun Catholic Church in 1910. From their various contradictory affidavits to the court, the story can be reconstructed as follows: According to Courtney, about a year into their marriage, he arrived home one day to find Mary in bed with another man. Mary acknowledged her guilt and apologized. Courtney forgave her and they continued to live as husband and wife for some time. Eventually, Courtney decided to send Mary back to Jamaica, though two of his affidavits give contradictory reasons—it was either because he could not afford to keep her in Panama, or because she requested to be sent back. Mary said that, during this time in Jamaica, she received no support over \$5.00 and that Courtney tried to dissuade her from returning, though he argued that he supported her fully. She nevertheless returned to Panama and got a job in Gatun as a domestic for the family of a Captain Johnson, settling down independently of Courtney who had neglected his spousal responsibilities. This decision to return alone implies that Mary was already seeking to distance herself from her marriage. Since Courtney had made it clear he would not support her by refusing to send remittances to her in Jamaica, Mary found a job in Panama to support herself.

Courtney did not visit Mary until several months after her return to Panama, to accuse her of adultery. During this time, she had indeed started a relationship with another man, Charley Scott, and was then living with a second man named Pearson. When Courtney confronted her about these relationships, Mary said she “intends to do what she likes.” In his witness statement, Courtney’s brother Charlie Black corroborated

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<sup>10</sup> Courtney Black v Mary Black (1912), Canal Zone First Judicial Circuit Court (Balboa), Civil Case Files, 1905-1914, Case 124.

his story, adding that Mary was unrepentant about her actions and had told him that “her skin was hers to do with as she pleased.”<sup>11</sup> Both times Mary clearly expressed her dislike for the restrictions of married life with Courtney. Her use of “skin” to symbolize her identity suggests the limitations she felt in her female body and her desire to live free of these. It also had an added sexual connotation—Mary sought the sexual freedom to have relationships with whomever she chose. In the Canal Zone, black men greatly outnumbered women. This created a sexual economy that favored black women. Though women had to live in a male-dominated community, the skewed sexual economy gave them greater leverage to pick and choose—as well as control—their relationships. As the song “Woman a Heavy Load” laments, it is often women who seem to be making the decision to initiate a new relationship, and they can have their pick. The separation from the familial and societal limitations of their home back in the West Indies and the sexual economy of the Canal allowed black women new sexual freedoms. Women like Mary used that freedom to extend their sexual autonomy and use their bodies as they wished.

Meanwhile, Courtney had begun living in concubinage with a neighboring woman, Evelyn Davis. Mary went to Evelyn's house to complain about Courtney's adultery. He began to beat her while Evelyn insulted her. Mary tried to take matters to the court—she visited the District Judge at Ancon and told him of the situation but he said “he was unable to assist her under the circumstances.”<sup>12</sup> Though Courtney was able to use Mary's adultery against her and position her as an oversexed deviant, Mary had no possibility of requesting the divorce she desired through leveraging her husband's adulterous behavior.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

Courtney hinged his complaint to the court on Mary's unladylike behavior. Both he and his brother emphasized the sexual impropriety of her behavior. When Mary asked him for a divorce, Courtney later told the court he "left in disgust" and ignored her, as if her merely requesting a divorce from a obviously failing marriage was a deplorable act. Courtney complained further that, since then, Mary had started to annoy him at his workplace. In these divorce cases, West Indian men often complained about the effect of their wives' nagging on their work. Canal courts were highly sympathetic to this argument from male laborers, wishing above all to maintain labor productivity. Courtney complained that Mary visited him at work every day repeating that she "wants to be free" and demanding a divorce.<sup>13</sup> Courtney did eventually request that the Court grant him a divorce from Mary. Even though she could not request a divorce through legal means, Mary exerted her power and voiced her complaints to Courtney, wearing him down in public until he gave in to her demands.

After reading the many contradictory affidavits from each party and probably listening to their continued fighting, the court granted the divorce. The judge decided in favor of Courtney and found Mary guilty of adultery and cruelty to her husband but Courtney was still forced to pay \$10.00 a month alimony to Mary as well as all the court fees. In most other cases brought to the Zone courts, a husband's financial neglect of his wife was considered justification enough to grant a divorce in favor of the wife. In the Black divorce, however, Courtney built a story around Mary's unladylike behavior—her loudness, her verbal abuse, her continued fighting and "nagging" and her adultery—that took precedence over his faults. The court decided in favor of Courtney, as he was considered the victim of Mary's loose behavior. Nevertheless, the courts did acknowledge

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

Courtney's responsibility for Mary's financial stability, ordering that he pay her a \$10.00 monthly alimony. Though Mary had a job as domestic servant and, like many other women of the Canal, could provide for herself and had already done so for a while, the court still considered Courtney financially responsible for her. In almost every case, even when the court decided in favor of the husband, they required that husbands pay some alimony.

One of the reasons West Indian women sought divorce more frequently than their white counterparts was that the availability of jobs for black women in the Canal gave them some social and financial autonomy. West Indian women in the Zone often had jobs and could support themselves. Many of them took care of their families on their own and, as the Black case shows, there was little stigma associated with having a relationship with a divorced woman. However, the courts did not acknowledge this. The Canal courts saw West Indian women as financially dependent on the laboring men and themselves as a paternalistic institution that could safeguard women's financial well-being. The fact that Courtney had to pay alimony also implies that Mary's behavior, though unladylike and aggressive, was not severely punished. The Panama courts seemed to expect "uncouth" behavior from West Indian women and, though they shamed Mary by finding her at fault, they did not otherwise penalize her.

William Hall also petitioned the Canal courts in 1906 for a divorce from his wife, Elmira, citing her abuse as the cause. William and Elmira, both Barbadians by birth, married in the city of St. George, Grenada in 1893.<sup>14</sup> About three months after the marriage, William complained, Elmira began a course of constant verbal and physical

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<sup>14</sup> William Hall v Elmira Hall (1906), Canal Zone Third Judicial Circuit Court (Cristobal), Civil Case Files, 1905-1914, Case 54.

abuse. Elmira called him “many ugly and unbecoming names,” and the abuse reached such a point as to “jeopardize his means of livelihood.” The fights came to a head on May 23, 1906, when Elmira accused William of “indecent conduct” with his fifteen-year-old daughter, Loretta Hall, product of a previous relationship. Elmira circulated this rumor around the community. The court summoned Elmira but she defaulted on the court date, and the divorce was granted without any input from her. Clearly Elmira's abuse was not reason enough to seek divorce for William until she began publishing rumors of his sexual misconduct. The divorce seems like a means to legally clear his name from Elmira's rumors, but it does not necessarily clear him of guilt altogether. The history of Elmira's abuse throughout their marriage and especially the mention of its effect on his work seem like calculated decisions to have the Canal Zone court, which was established mainly to protect labor peace, on his side. The veracity of Elmira's claim and her motivations cannot be ascertained. William could have been sexually abusing his daughter, and Elmira could have been jealous of their relationship or trying to protect her. Either way, she could not use legal methods to achieve her goal, but she did try to use other weapons at her disposal to do so, such as gossip.

Like Elmira, some West Indian women were not in powerful positions, yet managed to create options for themselves by seeking divorce. Mary Leonie lived in St. Lucia when she met Alfred Meltz, a Canal jeweler back home for a visit.<sup>15</sup> Alfred proposed to her with the promise of a better life in the Isthmus. She traveled to Panama to marry him in December of 1912. Instead of moving in together, Alfred rented a room for her at a hotel. According to her petition for divorce, Alfred refused to live with and

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<sup>15</sup> Mary Leonie Meltz v Alfred Meltz (19), Canal Zone First Judicial Circuit Court (Balboa), Civil Case Files, 1905-1914, Case 139.

abandoned her at the hotel while he lived in concubinage with someone else. Mary received no money beyond the payment for the hotel and claimed to be unable even to afford a bond or court fees. Since it is unlikely she had procured a job during her short stay in the Canal, Mary basically lived a life of confinement—she had no money and no knowledge of the area to go out beyond the hotel. After a month and a half of this arrangement, Mary petitioned the court for a divorce. Even though she had no money and no support network in the Canal, Mary found a way out of her restrictive marriage with Alfred. He argued in court that he put her up in a hotel because there was no other housing and had not visited because he was busy with work; that he had not been abusive or adulterous and that in fact, it was she who was making unreasonable demands on him and on the hotel. The court granted the divorce—Alfred was to pay \$500.00 alimony to Mary, while she awaited deportation on the next boat for St. Lucia.

West Indian women saw men's financial support as a spousal obligation, particularly for their children, but divorce was not the only solution these women sought when their husbands neglected them financially. For example, one account from Core's Maid in Panama, titled "A Maiden Young and Fair", tells the story of a white boss who has to deal with his worker's personal problems.<sup>16</sup> He often receives letters from West Indian women complaining that certain men have not paid the child support they owe. The story paints the event as amusing, making fun of the "irate lady" and frames it around the heavy burden of the "unofficial duties" the white man who works with West Indians has to bear. But the story also reveals that West Indian women considered child support their prerogative, even when they were unmarried and had no "legal" right to it under Canal law. This story in particular cites a letter sent to a white boss from a West

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<sup>16</sup> Core, 72.

Indian woman called Ellspeth Graham, supposedly copied verbatim. Though the letter may have been edited for publishing, it is one of the few sources of direct words from a West Indian woman.

“Respectful Sir:

In the large trubel of my hart I write to you. I am a fair young maden of twenty-one (21) summers what has suffered grate wrong from one Cyril Thelan works for you. I born fo him two (2) suns, aged ate and ten yrs old. They are his and he don't help me no more since he took up with that Sophy Andrews lives in Chorillo. My honer was torn assunder and I need a comisary book for he hasn't given me one (1) fore one month. Make him come to time and the Lord Jesus help you forever.

Your obedient servant.

Ellspeth Graham.”<sup>17</sup>

The situation with Ellspeth shows how women sought to sustain their families through various methods with their more limited economic resources. Ellspeth sought extra-legal means to ensure her child support payments in the form of a commissary book (equivalent to food stamps). The letter suggests that many West Indian women, like Ellspeth, must have known how to manipulate the paternalistic American boss system. In her letter, Ellspeth places herself as the “obedient servant” who requires the help of a powerful boss. Moreover, Ellspeth cleverly uses the language of the romance novel to present herself as a “fair maiden” and the boss as a chivalrous white knight who can defend her honor. Ellspeth claims that her “honer was torn assunder,” even though she is not an “honorable” maiden by Victorian standards—she has borne two sons out of wedlock. In the letter, Ellspeth redefines honor as financial need and makes a plea to the boss' masculine power to return this honor to her. She also makes religious references, alluding to the white boss' moral responsibility for his work crew—a Christian knight. The story suggests that ignoring the “irate lady” could create bigger problems—“the Boss

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 73.

generally tries to settle the matter himself, rather than have the irate lady in the picture carry the case to 'the Building'.<sup>18</sup> This practice, which the story suggests was common, shows that West Indian women understood the American power structure and how it could work for them. It also shows that American structures in the Canal could work to the benefit of black women.

In Panama, West Indian women had stable jobs, an advantage in the sexual economy and freedom from the expectations of marriage and sexuality imposed by their families back home. The diasporic move to Panama presented West Indian women with a new option—they could easily divorce their husbands through the Canal courts. The cases show how West Indian women manipulated the expectations of the American legal institutions to liberate themselves from the restrictions that marriage posed in each of their individual situations.

### **Insanity**

In 1905 the Isthmian Canal Commission authorized Ancon Asylum, the first mental health facility on the Isthmus and after this, the courts of the Canal Zone oversaw several cases regarding insanity. The cases dealt with committing persons who were in hospitals to the asylum, either when their family members requested their transfer or when the hospital facilities proved insufficient to provide for the patient. For the transfer to take place, insanity had to be attested to by two physicians and the superintendent of hospital. The patient was then interned for a thirty day examination period, after which the mental ward physicians reported their status to the court that made a final decision. Most inmates of the asylum were Panamanians and West Indians, since Americans were

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 73.

only held “until their legal residence can be ascertained or their relatives or friends located, when they are sent to the states.”<sup>19</sup>

The majority of patients committed to Ancon Asylum through the civil courts were West Indian women. The insanity cases of the Third Judicial Circuit Court help illuminate the limits of acceptable behavior for black women in the Canal. That having been said, it does not, for the most part, seem to be the case that women were committed by their husbands merely for adultery or bad housekeeping as historians have found for some other places and time periods. Instead, in these cases, women show a variety of symptoms that could be interpreted as genuine insanity or as creating danger for themselves or others. There were about ten such cases in the time period I studied. This suggests that committing people to Ancon Asylum was not common and might have served a real need. Divorce cases suggest that the spectrum of acceptable behavior for black women may have widened in the Canal where many actions of violence, adultery or “unfeminine” behavior, such as that of Mary Black and Elmira Hall, went unpunished. But there *was* a limit. When women crossed a certain line, they could be committed to the Asylum. The insanity cases will show the possible placement of the line between acceptable (though maybe obnoxious or disliked) and unacceptable behavior in the Canal Zone.

Ten women were brought to the civil courts to be committed to Ancon Asylum. All of them had lived in the Canal for some years and had usually migrated in the first years of construction. Five of them were in their twenties, four were in their forties and one, the oldest, was seventy years old. Except for two women committed by the hospital

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<sup>19</sup> “Commission Hospital Service: Ancon Hospital,” *Canal Record*, Vol. 1 (Ancon, Canal Zone: Ishtmian Canal Commission Printing Office, 1908), 390.

superintendent and the police, the cases were brought to the court by family members of the insane, usually husbands, but also mothers, sons and sisters. Since the courts rarely sought to punish black women for aggressive behavior, the family had the social responsibility of protecting them and enforcing their conformity to the standards of socially approved behavior. Family members were closest to the patients and thus more aware of subtle changes in their personality and more “responsible” for their behavior to the social body.

The cases are, for the most part, very short and leave a lot of questions unanswered. All the cases come from the years 1911 and 1913. Since the Commission built the Asylum in 1905, this would mean the courts did not commit any black women there until many years later. The problem is that the civil court records on insanity are incomplete. Most insanity cases were tried through probate courts and only taken to civil court if deemed necessary. Many of the gaps in the story might be filled by searching through probate court cases and hospital records, research which is beyond the scope of the present study. Moreover, these cases were all tried in the Third Judicial Circuit Court at Cristobal. Cristobal was a port city next to Colon, on the opposite end of the Canal from Ancon, next to Panama City, where the asylum was situated. This might have been because Colon was the site of a large hospital where many of the women were patients before they were sent to the Asylum. But what of the women in other hospitals in the Zone? No cases regarding insanity appear in the other Circuit courts. Nevertheless, the movement of these women from the Colon area to Ancon must have been a significant change, separating them from their families and their homes. It was thus very unlikely

that the women in Ancon Asylum received visitors—their commitment meant a period of seclusion and abandonment by those close to them.

The information on insanity and black women in the Canal is scant. It might be the case that the probate court records would force a reassessment of these sources. The case files give no clue as to why these cases went all the way to civil court, rather than being resolved in probate courts. It is not even completely certain, given this sample, that black women were committed to the asylum more than men, although it is certain that almost all the patients were West Indians. Given the limited nature of the sources of insanity, how are we to interpret these aberrant cases? Do we view these women as victims of patriarchal institutions of control? Or as sick women in need of the protection and care their families and doctors provided? What can they tell us about black women's experience in the Canal?

Louisa Hinds, a 43 year old Jamaican, had lived in Panama for six years, since the beginning of the construction of the American canal.<sup>20</sup> Her only son, Mordecia (sic Mordecai?) Barnes, explained to the court that, a month before he petitioned to have her committed, she started acting strangely—“she does not seem to be able to comprehend what is said to her when questioned” and only responds “to repeat the words spoken to her.” This behavior coincided with a marked increase in “heavy alcoholic indulgence.” The petition also noted that Louisa was widowed and was solely dependent on her son for financial support. After her examination period, the doctors informed the court that Louisa showed improvement, but still remained withdrawn, “indifferent, indolent and seclusive.” Several months later, the asylum discharged Louisa from the asylum, saying

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<sup>20</sup> In the matter of the sanity of Louisa Hinds (1911), Canal Zone Third Judicial Court (Cristobal), Civil Case Files, 1905-1914, Case 387.

she had recovered all her mental faculties and referring to her period of insanity as her “recent attack.” Louisa lived alone, since her partner had recently died, and she could not support herself. This situation could easily have contributed to a depressive emotional state. Perhaps her son Mordecia decided that, as a young working man, he had no time to take care of a withdrawn older woman who spent her day drinking. Mordecia's commitment of his mother was akin to placing her under protective custody or a kind of suicide watch, as her mental state had rendered her a danger to herself and Mordecia's job prevented him from taking care of Louisa.

As in Louisa's case, the asylum discharged most of the West Indian women at the end or shortly after the examination period. Possibly the asylum thought the women were at least well enough to be cared for in their homes, as the Canal facility probably had less money and resources to keep people there for the long-term. Except for one woman, Louise Fletcher, who had mental problems her whole life and a family history of insanity, all the women brought to the court had a sudden, and usually temporary, onset of insanity. Louise's sister, Estelle, requested that the Court send Louise to Ancon asylum after a long stay at Colon Hospital.<sup>21</sup> Six years earlier, before coming to the Canal, Louise had been confined in an insane asylum in Barbados for a period of six months. Since the Fletcher sisters later moved to the Canal together, they may have considered Louise's insanity temporary or her sister thought she could take equally good care of her in Panama. Back in Barbados, their mother had also been confined to an insane asylum, which suggests that the Fletchers had a history of mental illness. It is possible that the Fletcher sisters left Barbados to escape the stigma of this family history.

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<sup>21</sup> In the matter of the sanity of Louise Fletcher (1911), Canal Zone Third Judicial Circuit Court (Cristobal), Civil Case Files, 1905-1914, Case 379.

In the six years prior to her illness, Louise had been working as a domestic servant in the house of one Mr. Hart, local auditor of the Panama Railroad. Even though Louise must have interacted with the family on a daily basis, her mental health and strange behavior was not their responsibility. It was Estelle who put Louise in the hospital in July of 1911. Her employers seem not to have been involved in any part of the process. In the hospital, Louise developed “acute mania,” a condition requiring her confinement in a cell. The physicians decided she suffered from “Dementia Praecox” as a way to explain her numerous symptoms, including “delusions of grandeur; constant exalted emotional state; religiously over-zealous.”<sup>22</sup> The court decided to keep Louise in the asylum until such time as her condition had improved enough that Estelle could take her back to Barbados. The Fletcher case shows how the zone authorities saw deportation as an efficient method to get rid of people who could not contribute to the Canal project.

Half of the women in the insanity cases were reported to be violently insane, often requiring confinement or restraint. Violence was not a common reason for women to be committed to asylums at the time, which suggests that these women were enough of a danger to themselves or others that they really did require institutionalization. Emily Jones and Florence Davis were both married West Indian women in their twenties who had an episode of violent behavior, were committed by their husbands and were subsequently discharged after the examination period. In each of these cases, the women exhibited extremely aggressive behavior. Florence had lived on the Isthmus for nine years, meaning she arrived just before Canal construction began.<sup>23</sup> In his petition, her

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, Letter from L.M. Drennan, Acting Physician, to Cristobal Court judge (August 10, 1911). The disease “Dementia Precox” was later reframed by physicians in the 1920’s as schizophrenia.

<sup>23</sup> In the matter of the sanity of Florence Davis (1912), Canal Zone Third Judicial Circuit Court (Cristobal), Civil Case Files, 1905-1914, Case 428.

husband Henry Davis, a switchman on the Panama Railroad, stated that “she became troublesome at home on Wednesday...and that, on the day of her admission, she became so violent they could not care for her at home.” Apart from her violence, the petition listed no other symptoms. “Troublesome,” then, appears to mean a kind of behavior that bothered Henry. He also says that she did not become violent until the day of her admission. Since she could not have been admitted without prior arrangement, it is possible that Florence's aggression might have been a response to an institutionalization she did not desire.

On her arrival at the hospital, the doctors tied Florence to a bed to restrain her. They informed the court that Florence seemed to be in a state of “partial catalepsy,” a condition marked by lack of response to external stimuli and muscular rigidity. Having a husband who committed her to an asylum and staying in a hospital that kept her restrained on a bed all day with no visitors must have been a harrowing and anxiety-ridden experience. However, after thirty days, the doctors informed the court that Florence had “regained possession of her mental faculties” and was discharged.

Emily Jones, a 23 year old Barbadian, moved to the Isthmus to live with Edward Nurse, a West Indian man employed on a dredge.<sup>24</sup> They had met in Barbados earlier, and Edward paid for her passage to Panama so they could live together as common law husband and wife. Emily had no other family in Panama and could only rely on Edward, for whom she had left her life behind and traveled across the sea. Edward told the physicians that two months after her arrival Emily began to talk irrationally at times and suddenly became violent one Sunday morning. He took her to Colon Hospital to deal

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<sup>24</sup> In the matter of the sanity of Emily Jones (1912), Canal Zone Third Judicial Circuit Court (Cristobal), Civil Case Files, 1905-1914, Case 454.

with her sudden aggression. The whole time Emily was in the hospital, the doctors kept her in close confinement, enclosed in a solitary cell because she was “violently insane.” The hospital staff had difficulty caring for her because she “fights everyone who attempts to go near her.” After her stay in Colon Hospital, the doctors advised Edward to petition for her commitment to the asylum. In the asylum, Emily was probably subject to a similar treatment of solitary confinement and exclusion. About eight months later, the Asylum discharged Emily, telling the court she had recovered mentally.

Florence and Emily's violence suggests that they were somehow dangerous. Though Florence's initial commitment could be interpreted as her husband trying to control her behavior, her later catalepsy is an uncommon and serious condition. Emily also became irrationally violent in the eyes of her husband. In the hospital, no one could approach her, implying that she was dangerous to others and refused help. But the cases do not provide enough information to ascertain that either woman truly needed commitment. For the husbands who committed them, what was the line between merely “troublesome” and dangerously violent?

Several other women who were committed to the Asylum were violent. Jamaican Elsie West was the oldest black woman to be committed to Ancon by the Canal courts at the age of 70.<sup>25</sup> When she was committed, Elsie had lived in Pedro Miguel, Panama for twenty years, meaning she had moved in the first wave of West Indian migration during the construction of the French canal. On June 5<sup>th</sup>, 1913, Elsie was admitted to Colon Hospital. There, she exhibited delusions of persecution and hallucinations. More importantly, she “frequently becomes noisy and violent, requiring restraint to prevent her

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<sup>25</sup> In the matter of the sanity of Elsie West (1913), Canal Zone Third Judicial Circuit Court (Cristobal), Civil Case Files, 1905-1914, Case 523.

from disturbing the other patients in the ward.”<sup>26</sup> Elsie is one of the few West Indian women who was not committed by a family member. In fact, the hospital and court could not find any relatives or friends living in the Canal Zone. As a much older woman, with no one to vouch for her and no use as a laborer, the physicians were quick to consign Elsie to the asylum. After her month of examination, Elsie was found to be insane, “suffering from an organic disease of the brain.” The physician’s letter notes that, though her violence has ceased, she “continues to be dull and mentally confused.” Whether Elsie was insane or not, she was a much older woman with no one else to take care of her. Many older black women must have stayed with their families or even gone back to the West Indies. Elsie, who was alone and suffering from a degenerative disease possibly related to her old age, had to stay in an asylum. The asylum doctors allowed her to stay and took care of her when there was no one else to do so.

Helen Richards, a forty-year old single Jamaican woman, had lived in Colon for seven years with her mother, Susan. She had spent this time working as a domestic servant. Her mother asked the court to commit Helen because she had become violently insane, so much so that the doctors in Colon Hopistal had been keeping her in close confinement. Along with the violent behavior, Helen also refused food and treatment and had delusions of persecution and religiosity. Helen is one of the clearer cases—without help, her refusal of food would have quickly killed her.

If the sample from the civil courts is representative, insanity was gendered as well as racialized. Courts probably judged men on a different scale of acceptable “insanity” since they were considered the backbone of the Canal economy. However, the cases do

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., Letter from Claude Pierce, Ancon Hospital Superintendent to Cristobal District Judge (July 2, 1913).

not show that insanity became a “female malady” associated with women's reproductive systems, as Elaine Showalter argues was commonly the case in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century England.<sup>27</sup> No women were committed for hysteria or unchastity. Rather, the cases show that most black women who were committed had at least one reasonable symptom of being a danger to themselves or others. These women did cross some line, but it seems to have been one defined primarily by a desire to protect and only secondarily by a desire to control. The asylum, then, served as a place of care, doing as much as it could with the few resources it probably had. What the cases never discuss are the causes of mental illness among black women. Though each case had individual causes, generally, in the Canal Zone, mental illness such as depression or anxiety was presumably intricately connected to socio-economic factors such as urbanization, loneliness, changes in family structure, spousal abuse, alienation, isolation from former social networks in the islands and the encounter with American and Panamanian racism. But on these issues the records are silent.

In divorce cases, the Canal courts saw women through a gendered and racialized lens. The racist and highly masculine ideals of the American Canal government meant that black women's labor and general contributions to Canal society were ignored. Thus, black women were often seen as financially dependent on their husbands. In these cases, women manipulated the court's expectations of their position to gain benefits. They used the option of divorce to seek more freedoms for themselves in Panama in a black female intervention on the contact zone. Insanity cases, on the other hand, show the limits of behavior for black women in Panama. Though the asylum could serve as a place of

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<sup>27</sup> Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985).

healing and protection, it was also a last resort for family members to control or isolate women whose behavior was not accepted in mainstream society. The divorce cases show that black women could push the boundaries of the Canal institutions and the insanity cases show how far. These cases also show the extent to which many West Indian women and families saw their lives in Panama as more than temporary labor, using the institutions of the Canal to solve the issues of their private lives.

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## **Conclusion**

In doing this research, I was consistently surprised at the wealth of information available about black women in the Panama Canal Zone. Almost every scholar excused their silence on black women's lives on the lack of sources. Yet, the memoirs of white women speak often about these women's relationships to their domestics and the race relations of the Canal. Sue Core's book, which focuses explicitly on the relationship between Americans and West Indians in service jobs, has been completely ignored by Canal historians. The court records, which have many cases featuring black women, have sat in the National Archives since the 1980's, easily accessible to any visitor, yet only Julie Greene has looked at them. There is not as much information about black women as there is about other groups in the Canal, but their stories are not hidden—they are everywhere. Only in retrospect has the Canal become a purely American construction.

This thesis tells the story of West Indian women in the Panama Canal during the decade of construction—their migration, their work and their family life. The first chapter discusses black women's motivations to migrate and their experience traveling and settling in Panama. Black women had many reasons to migrate to the Canal. They based their decision to migrate on a variety of factors, including economic incentives, emotional relationships and a desire for a new start. The second chapter describes the different types of labor women performed in the Canal Zone and how they negotiated the authority between themselves and their bosses. Lastly, the third chapter looks at divorce and insanity cases, and explores how black women manipulated the American system to gain more freedoms, as well as how this system at times protected them. These chapters show

how black women took advantage of the opportunities available in Panama at the time, seeking independence in their jobs and relationships.

The sources also show the highly public and interactive nature of black women's lives. Jane Hall, for example, owned a boarding-house frequented by West Indian workers and engaged with the courts in several debt cases that show how many in the community were interacting with her. White women's memoirs show that black women such as the "Hoo-Hoo lady" and the "Fuzzy-Wuzzys" also spent their time moving in public spaces, interacting with many different people of the Zone through their work as petty merchants and laundresses. Mary Black was a constant subject of gossip in her neighborhood during her drawn-out divorce case. Black women were not invisible, like Canal historians have characterized them. In fact, they were important players in the contact zone of Panama.

Though there are more sources than historians have credited, many gaps still remain in the history of West Indian women in the Canal. One of these gaps is their role as mothers. Though there are some sources that include children, such as Angelina's and Ellspeth's stories, they do not explore the relationship of children to their mothers. The story of these relationships is essential to understanding black women's role in the social reproduction of West Indian communities in the Canal. My mostly American sources also limited the possibility of expanding the project in certain ways. As I mentioned earlier, the lives of domestic servants outside the workplace is silenced by the voices of their bosses. Another aspect missing from my project is a deeper exploration of the other groups living in the area, including native Panamanians and other immigrant groups such as Indians and Chinese. Though this research would have gone beyond the limits of my project, it would have also added to the complexity of the "contact zone" theme, making

the image of the Canal more diverse. Historians have remained silent on the story of other immigrant groups, even though, like West Indians, Chinese and Indian communities continue to thrive in Panama today. Time constraints prevented me from searching thoroughly through the National Archives holdings on the Panama Canal courts. The Archives hold records of probate, magistrate and criminal courts where even more information about West Indian women probably resides.

The experience of black women in the first decade of the Canal Zone shows the beginnings of a permanent West Indian community in Panama. Nowadays, Panama has a thriving West Indian (now Afro-Panamanian) community. The story of this decade is the first stepping stone in a history of the West Indian community in Panama. This history requires a focus on black women, who were the main agents of Caribbeanization of Panama. Black men traveled to the Canal with the expectation of a temporary job—they would live in Panama for the time they worked on the Canal. They lived in barracks inside the Zone and worked for an American company that would leave them jobless once they completed the project. Black women, on the other hand, established families and homes and created businesses that would outlast the Canal project. Only through the work of women can we understand the transition between the years of the Canal construction and modern-day Panama.

The Panama Canal has thrived in the American imaginary as a symbol of triumphant and benevolent imperialism from a golden age of America. This thesis attempts to recenter the history of the Panama Canal as part of the history of the African diaspora and black women. The Canal was an Americans conception, but it was the work and socialization of black women in the area that really made it into the crossroads of the

world. The story of the construction of the Panama Canal is considered one of the great stories of American capitalism, but as with so many American myths, the mainstream story elides the contributions of black people and especially black women whose work and lives made the Canal possible. Black women were central to the Canal's construction, success, and history, and it is essential that their story be told.

## Appendix A

I had a lot of trouble finding the relevant court cases on my first visit to the Archives. The Canal collection is divided between the D.C. Archives and the University of Maryland—College Park Archives. D.C. has all the court cases, College Park has everything else (Commission Reports, Census, pictures). My work focused on the court cases and so I spent my time in D.C. Currently, the expert on the Canal at the D.C. Archives is Robert Ellis. I would recommend reading his helpful article about finding an ancestor through the archive's holding on the Panama Canal (<http://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2007/fall/panama.html>).

The court cases are all grouped under RECORD GROUP 21. The Canal is divided into three Judicial Circuits, which contain:

- Criminal Case Files
- Criminal Dockets
- Record of Complaints and Information
- Records of Subpoenas (only available for 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>)
- Civil Case Files
- Civil Dockets (only available for 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>)
- Probate Case Files (only available for 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>)
- Probate Dockets (only available for 1<sup>st</sup>)
- Record of Appointments (only available for 3<sup>rd</sup>)

Also available: Magistrate court cases from Cristobal and Supreme Court cases.

The files are subdivided by time periods. I concentrated on the decade of construction, and most case files of that period are divided between 1904-5 to 1914-5. The Archives do hold cases all the way to the 70's.

This is a record of all the cases I found featuring West Indian women. Some were not included in the main part of the thesis. I only searched thoroughly through the Civil Case Files. I perused the Criminal Files and found very little, so I concentrated instead on Civil Cases. Nevertheless, another researcher can continue the work I've begun.

<b>Case #</b>	<b>Reason</b>	<b>Participants(s)</b>	<b>Judicial Circuit</b>
115	Divorce	Beatrice Ford v Frederick Ford	1 <sup>st</sup>
124	Divorce	Courtney Black v Mary Black	1 <sup>st</sup>
130	Assault	Elandina Edghill v R Kielly	1 <sup>st</sup>
133	Divorce	Annie Sparks v Helon Sparks	1 <sup>st</sup>
139	Divorce	Mary Leonie Metz v Alfred Metz	1 <sup>st</sup>
163	Divorce	Eugenia Peters v Arthur Peters	1 <sup>st</sup>
25	Estate	Fanny Black	2 <sup>nd</sup>
33	Estate	Eglantine McFarland	2 <sup>nd</sup>
36	Damages	Jane Hall v Thomas Burton	2 <sup>nd</sup>
62	Appeals	Rufus Melhado v Jane Hall	2 <sup>nd</sup>
87	Divorce	Sarah Mitchell v James Mitchell	2 <sup>nd</sup>
90	Damages	China Byastan v Jane Hall	2 <sup>nd</sup>
91	Debt	William Turner v Jane Hall	2 <sup>nd</sup>
93	Debt	Robert Newman v Jane Hall	2 <sup>nd</sup>
280	Divorce	Mary McFarlane v JJ McFarlane	2 <sup>nd</sup>
15	Divorce	Richard Lewis v Felicia Lewis	3 <sup>rd</sup>
45	Divorce	Gertrude Hale v Alva Hale	3 <sup>rd</sup>
54	Divorce	William Hall v Elmira Hall	3 <sup>rd</sup>
58	Divorce	Jane Jones v Alfred Jones	3 <sup>rd</sup>
379	Insanity	Louise Fletcher	3 <sup>rd</sup>
387	Insanity	Louisa Hinds	3 <sup>rd</sup>
428	Insanity	Florence Davis	3 <sup>rd</sup>
454	Insanity	Elsie West	3 <sup>rd</sup>
523	Insanity	Katherine Burrell v Nathan Turner	3 <sup>rd</sup>
530	Divorce	Elmire Aredie	3 <sup>rd</sup>
531	Insanity	Martha Lobers	3 <sup>rd</sup>
532	Insanity	Frances Campbell	3 <sup>rd</sup>
536	Insanity	Martha Newell	3 <sup>rd</sup>
540	Insanity	Helen Richards	3 <sup>rd</sup>
542	Insanity	Emily Jones	3 <sup>rd</sup>

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