

“Claiming the Canal: Performances of Race and Nation in Panama, 1904-1999

I. Overview

This dissertation examines the history of theatre and performance events in, around, and about the Panama Canal Zone from the beginning of Panama Canal construction (1904) to the Canal’s handover to Panamanian sovereignty in 1999. For nearly one hundred years, the Panama Canal and adjacent Canal Zone hosted performances of sovereignty, imperialism, nationhood, and racial identity by US and Panamanian citizens. Panama Canal construction motivated Panama’s US-aided independence in 1903 and spawned a massive intra-Caribbean labor migration. Representations of the Panama Canal have, therefore, been crucial to Panamanians’ constructions of their nation while buttressing the citizenship claims of the West Indian Panamanians whose ancestors helped to build the Canal. Likewise, the thousands of US citizens (nicknamed “Zonians”) who resided in the Canal Zone have formed lasting ties to Panama. Panama constitutes a key site in the “US-Caribbean world” (Frank Guridy, *Forging Diaspora* 63; qtd Zien 118): as a nexus of racial mixing and a locus of US foreign policy in the twentieth century, Panama offers new means of understanding US empire and African diaspora “routes” as these converge in the Caribbean.

II. Methodologies

My research methodologies include musicology, theatre and performance studies (entailing textual and performance analysis, ethnographic interviews, and aesthetic theory), and historiographies of the Western hemisphere. Privileging archival and ethnographic research, my fieldwork draws upon North American and Latin American studies, Caribbean studies, African diasporic studies, and political theory. I employ “performance” both as a conceptual category – influenced by my training in performance studies – and in terms of the material performance events that helped to shape the identities and affiliations of US and Panamanian citizens. In the former sense, I detail the techniques through which the US-occupied Canal Zone “performed” multiple identities (e.g., army base, civilian enclave, and diplomatic conflict zone) during the twentieth century. I theorize performances as “homing devices,” locating groups in specific places and times. The study of performances can divulge substantial insight about the ideologies, anxieties, and desires that sustain groups, particularly in contexts of transition or crisis. The world-making or “worlding” power of performance – its enactments of alternative futures or materializations of possible utopias onstage – facilitates collective yearnings to remake history, or to remember the past differently.

III. Chapter Breakdown

The Introduction, “Worlding the Canal: Performances of Race, Nation, and Empire in Pan-

ama,” asks how the Panama Canal staged questions of sovereignty for Panama and the United States. I compare the “worlding” work of performance to the Panama Canal’s history of “worlding.” Indeed, Panama – whose slogan is *pro mundi beneficio* – was allegedly created for “the good of the world,” to facilitate global trade.¹ As such, Panama has been the site of competing “worlding” projects. In addition to US expansionist goals, the Panamanian oligarchy had long sought to make Panama a “Hanseatic” commercial entrepôt. The Hay-Bunau Varilla Treaty complicated definitions of sovereignty in the Panama Canal Zone through the use of the subjunctive tense. In English, the contested phrase of Article III, which allowed the United States to exercise power in the Canal Zone “as if it were sovereign” of the Zone, makes purposefully ambiguous the question of whether the treaty has granted the United States sovereign status. Yet if translated into Spanish (as it might have been had any Panamanians been present at its signing), the phrase “como si fuera” elicits intensified uncertainty. The treaty’s provision of “subjunctive sovereignty” in the Canal Zone hinged both on the treaty’s status as a “performative utterance” – language that enacts, according to the speech-act theory of J.L. Austin – and the ambiguity of the phrase “as if.” My introduction makes a theoretical intervention by connecting the treaty’s “as if” – which continues to sow contestation throughout the twentieth century – to the utopian and world-making power of performance’s “as if.” Contestations over the Canal Zone’s sovereignty, I argue, ironically allowed Panamanians and West Indian labor migrants to imagine new futures for the Canal Zone even in the midst of great political discord.

The Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty “engendered a form of US imperialism whose efficacy lay in the very act of its self-negation” (20). Further, the Canal Zone’s subjunctive sovereignty introduced “subjunctive citizens” – labor migrants whose families lay between the Republic of Panama and the Canal Zone. Questions around the citizenship of these immigrants – many of West Indian descent – swirled throughout the twentieth century. National belonging was linked to racial identity: the Canal Zone used a “gold” (white) and “silver” (black) system, which included Jim Crow segregation and a racialized, two-tiered wage scale. Therefore, many “silver” workers began to identify with the quests for belonging of African Americans. By contrast, Panamanian racism was more subtle, interlaced with xenophobia. Where the treaty’s “as if” introduced a variety of subjunctives into Panama’s genesis, it also opened pathways to creatively reimagine nationhood and belonging throughout the twentieth century. As I demonstrate below, many theatre and performing artists and audiences took up these challenges.

In **Chapter One, “Semiotics of Statecraft: Performing US Governance Abroad,”** I outline the ways that US and West Indian workers forged identities through performances in and around the Panama Canal Zone, from the advent of the Canal to the Second World War. Produced and attended by US and West Indian workers, these performances shaped identities and created networks of normativity and resistance. I enfold the history of performance in the early Canal Zone within an analysis of leisure as a socially structuring

¹See the 2013 special issue 6.2 of *Global South*, whose editors, Ifeoma Nwankwo and Claudia Milian, espouse a concept of “worlding” as central to the Panama Canal’s conception (2).

element. While labor in the Panama Canal Zone has been studied intensively (by Michael Conniff and Julie Greene, among others), its corollary, leisure, is often overlooked. Yet for thousands of US and West Indian workers, leisure activities proved instrumental in shaping identities, relationships, and affiliations.

For the United States government, the Canal Zone marked a distinct type of imperialism that demanded new ways of imagining US citizenship, economic power, and military might. The Canal Zone was to be an “object lesson” both for both US-based policymakers and Panamanians. The latter, cast as passive witnesses, were to “learn” national governance from the Canal Zone’s model. While the Zone performed itself symbolically as an engineering triumph, theatre and performance events in the Zone disseminated forms of sociality and social control. After chronicling the Canal Zone’s inception, alongside US President Theodore Roosevelt’s 1906 tour to Panama, I turn to the Zone’s transition into a “model colony.” This shift involved the construction of clubhouses – first operated by the YMCA, then by the Canal Zone Government (CZG), with funds allocated by US Congress, after the end of Canal construction in 1914. Part of the Zone’s “moral architecture,” clubhouses were designed to provide healthy amusements for white workers, exempting the large white male population of the need to enter Panama. Yet I show that the wide-ranging provision of amusements, including “States entertainers” in vaudeville, lyceum, Chautauqua, and other genres, did not prevent whites from leaving the Canal Zone. The Zone’s permeability for whites – and some Panamanians – served as an obstacle to peaceful US-Panama relations, resulting in sections of the Roosevelt-Arias Treaty in 1936 that limited US-Panamanian contact.

Yet the border’s porosity also permitted many exchanges and partnerships. West Indians’ social centers traversed the border, due to the lack of “silver” housing in the Canal Zone and to the persecution of West Indian gatherings in Panama. Beginning in the early twentieth century, West Indians petitioned the CZG to offer recreational spaces and resources for nonwhite workers. Their petitions were largely ignored until 1919, when the CZG acknowledged the permanency of the Canal Zone’s West Indian employees by funding amusements for “silver” employees and their families.

I compare changes in the CZG’s entertainment toward “gold” and “silver” employee populations. In the 1920s and 1930s, the CZG promoted a “Community Night” in which workers were given funds to perform entertainments for their peers. While the “gold-roll” Community Nights proved unpopular, the “silver” Community Nights were successful. Considering the places of white and West Indian workers in the Canal Zone and Panama, I assess possible reasons for this difference in outcomes. For both white and nonwhite workers, the gold and silver clubhouses proved important centers of social activity and economic transactions until the Torrijos-Carter Treaties depopulated the Zone beginning in 1977.

My next chapter takes up West Indian Panamanian performance practices in the 1940s, as the community outgrew the clubhouses. **Chapter Two, “Race, Transnational Performance, and West Indian Panamanian Citizenship in Concert,”** examines a series of high-profile cultural events organized by George Westerman, a West Indian Panamanian intellectual, activist, community leader, and concert promoter.

The son of St. Lucian and Barbadian parents, Westerman came of age in the Canal Zone. He was instrumental in bringing African American artists to Panama, considering his concerts not merely entertainment, but “civic work” (122). His company, *Conciertos Westerman* (Westerman Concerts), promoted black artists specializing in classical music to facilitate the entry of black cultural and social contributions into the Panamanian public sphere. Between 1949 and 1955, *Conciertos Westerman* contracted “African American lyric soprano June McMechen (1949), African American soprano Camilla Williams (1949), West Indian Panamanian pianist Emily Butcher (1949), African American pianist of Trinidadian descent Hazel Scott (1949), African American lyric soprano Dorothy Maynor (1950), African American contralto Carol Brice (1950), African American contralto Marian Anderson (1951), African American soprano Ellabelle Davis (1951), African American pianist Philippa Duke Schuyler (1952), African American singer Billy Eckstine and his trio (1953), African American baritone William Warfield (1953), and the cast of the Blevins-Breen production of *Porgy and Bess* (1955)” (104). Previously, Westerman had organized cultural events emphasizing intercultural understanding and anti-racism. I argue that Westerman’s immensely popular concert series “convene[d] a cosmopolitan, multiracial and multicultural audience base transcending Panama and the Canal Zone so as to link the accomplishments of black concert artists to manifestations of racial equity while ‘re-presenting’ black cultural and social contributions to publics of African descent in Panama” (122).

While considering the local effects of the Westerman concerts, I examine the travels of his featured artists. These classically trained artists were international celebrities, but many toured outside of the United States to evade US racism. Since Panama was a hub for touring artists at this time, Westerman readily engaged them. The artists’ repertoires featured European classical music and US-composed “new music,” always concluding with “Negro spirituals.” As a result, spirituals entered the musical imaginary of Panama’s West Indian-descended community, transmitted by music teachers like Emily Butcher, and became part of West Indian Panamanians’ sense of selfhood, as the community enacted a civil rights movement in Panama mirroring that in the United States. Drawing on the musicological research of Jon Cruz, Nina Eidsheim, Samuel Floyd, Ronald Radano, and others, I examine the affective labor of black female artists in forging (trans)national imaginaries. I conclude by charting the decline of *Conciertos Westerman*, as Westerman’s concert promotion activities were hindered by the dictatorship of Panamanian General Omar Torrijos Herrera, who came to power in 1968. Staunchly anti-dictatorship and anti-Communist, Westerman clashed with Torrijos, who also closed the West Indian newspaper that Westerman edited, the *Panama Tribune*.

While West Indian Panamanians employed performance practices to gain inclusion in the Panamanian nation-state, so-called “Latin” (non-West Indian) Panamanians utilized performances to protest US occupation of the Canal Zone and to stress ideologies of nationalist anticolonialism. **Chapter Three, “Remounting the Border: *La cucarachita mandinga*, 1937-2006,”** chronicles several performances of the most important play in the Panamanian canon, *La cucarachita mandinga* (*The Little Mandinga Cockroach*). First performed in 1937, the play was the created by Panamanian artists Rogelio Sinán and Gonzalo Brenes, but the core fable

– narrating the fate of a young cockroach who finds money and uses it to attract a spouse – is told throughout the Hispanophone Caribbean, in multiple variants. In the Panamanian play, the Cucarachita’s many suitors are portrayed as Euro-North American imperialists who hope to exploit her economically and sexually. The 1937 play tempers its violent and erotic themes through the use of cartoon imagery, labeling itself a “children’s farce” – yet subsequent iterations of the play, in text and performance, intensify the focus on colonial rape and exploitation.

Despite its dark themes, the play has been taken up as a work of national significance in Panama, and the Cucarachita construed as a symbol of the Panamanian nation-state. During the play’s premiere, Panamanian elites feared that their country was being economically and culturally “pulverized” by foreign immigrants and the US occupation. To instill nationalism, *La cucarachita mandinga* glorified Panama’s rural interior, mythologized as a space of whiteness in contraposition to the racially mixed port cities of Panama City and Colón. However, despite being set in the interior, the play features a “mandinga” protagonist. I explore the etymology of “mandinga” across Latin America and the Caribbean, uncovering pejorative connotations ranging from “clumsy” to “diabolical.” Rogelio Sinán sought to emphasize the positive aspects of “mandinga,” however, by linking the term to the noble Mandinka people of the Upper Niger. Yet Sinán’s “mandinga” is not represented as an African; rather, she is an Afro-Panamanian *mulata* (mixed-race woman). Her characterization in the script draws attention to the miscegenation that has composed the Panamanian citizenry. Complicating textual representations of the Cucarachita, however, is the fact that in all of the play’s major productions – in 1937, 1953, 1965, 1976, and 2006 – her role is performed by visibly non-black actresses. This performance detail introduces a split between the script – which represents the Panamanian nation-state as an insurgent, anticolonial woman of color – and the performances, which aligned the nation-state with the (alleged) whiteness of Panama’s interior. I argue that, despite the play’s ‘whitened’ protagonist in performance, Sinán’s script effectively “queries the place of blackness in the (re)production of Panamanian citizenship and national belonging” (181). Drawing upon the research of Vera Kutzinski, Francis Aparicio, and Alicia Arrizón, I indicate that Sinán’s black female protagonist repels her white, male foreign aggressors “despite the compounded abjection of her identity” (187).

While examining the play’s gendered and racial politics, I detail the history of its revisions. After midcentury, political and cultural contact between Panama and Cuba informed changes made to the play. In addition to the Bolivarianism that inflected the 1976 production, Fernando Ortiz’s *Contrapunteo cubano de tabaco y azúcar* informed Panamanian folkloric studies at midcentury, which greatly impacted the dramaturgical, musical, and choreographic choices of the 1965 and 1976 productions. The Torrijos regime produced a tremendous uptick in state support for artistic and cultural production, and Sinán, a cultural administrator, revised the script accordingly. The 1976 production converted the prior version into an anticolonial nationalist manifesto, eliminating innuendo. Anticipating the Panamanian referendum on the Torrijos-Carter Treaties that

was to take place the following year, the play foreshadowed the Canal's handover in the Cucarachita's triumph over her suitors.

Finally, the 2006 production, sponsored by the Panama Canal Authority (ACP), echoed elements of the foregoing iterations while attempting to provide postcolonial closure to Panamanian audiences by staging the play in the former Canal Zone, a site that had been off-limits to many Panamanians until the handover (1977-1999). Offered free of charge, this lavish, open-air production attracted massive audiences. Although the play used the 1976 script, the production toned down the text's most polemical elements through a welcoming *mise-en-scène*. Also echoing the 1976 production, the 2006 production preceded a public referendum – this time, a vote on the Panama Canal's expansion. I conclude with a discussion of the ways that a comparative production history of *La cucarachita mandinga*, drawn with an eye to links between theatre and society, can enable a closer understanding of political events and their cultural representations.

My final chapter, **“Performance and Politics in Commemorations of the Panama Canal Handover,”** examines two commemorations of the Panama Canal's transfer to Panamanian sovereignty in 1999. The first ceremony, the Panama Canal Handover Gala (also called the 85th anniversary of the Panama Canal), was a pageant sponsored by the US-owned and operated Panama Canal Company. The second, “Patria Entera,” was a massive open-air concert performed by salsa singer and politician Rubén Blades and sponsored by the Panama City mayoralty. Tracing the distinct discourses manufactured by each commemoration, I observe: “In portraying possible futures for the Panama Canal (Zone) within a unified Panama, each commemorative performance also emphasized certain group identities, historical continuities or ruptures, and authorizing claims of historical inclusion within national, regional, and global networks” (225).

The Handover Gala deployed a large mixed cast comprising US citizens, Panamanians, and Afro-Panamanians of West Indian descent. While fostering closure for groups directly linked to the Panama Canal Zone's history, the Gala also sought to help Panamanians to imagine the Panama Canal as “theirs.” The emphasis on the different nationalities of migrants to Panama contributed to a multicultural framing of the nation. Yet some participating Panamanian artists, including Rómulo Castro, subverting the harmonious aspects of the Gala, using performance to provoke Panamanians to critically examine the stakes of inheriting the Panama Canal at the turn of the millennium.

Also taking place in the Canal Zone, “Patria Entera” employed the iconic presence and talent of Rubén Blades to craft a sonic tapestry that stressed Panamanian unity. Blades grew up in Panama but made much of his music in New York; nevertheless, the concert represented his successful effort to recuperate himself as a “national artist,” a label with important implications in Panama. Borrowing from diverse genres of Panamanian music, including *pindín* (also known as *típico*), Blades highlighted his Panamanian heritage and identity and reviewed Panama's history in song. Nationalizing his brand of salsa, he ended the concert with “Patria,” often considered Panama's unofficial national anthem. I suggest that this concert, following Blades's unsuccessful bid for the Panamanian presidency, helped to lay the foundations for Blades's future involve-

ment in Panamanian politics. I conclude the chapter by commenting on the ways that both commemorations used performance practices to “transfor[m] Panamanian audiences into a momentary embodied, civic plurality” (269). I invoke Jill Dolan’s concept of the “utopian performative” to suggest that these site-specific performances in the Canal Zone converted the space from its former connotations of “utopia” (a paradise for US citizens only) to its future status as a Panamanian national utopia – a promise that has not been fulfilled, as the Zone has become privatized post-handover, once again forming a foreign enclave that is off-limits to all but the wealthiest Panamanians. Yet the Zone’s (post)colonial afterlife does not negate the power of these commemorations, which “sought to produce audiences as a sociohistorical plurality, deploying the Canal Zone as a spatial signifier of all that the populace stood to gain” (278). Such performances planted the seeds for future utopian longings and “worlding” projects in Panama and the Canal Zone – even as rampant overdevelopment and corruption continue to dampen many Panamanians’ hopes for economic equality, anticolonialism, and antiracism.

My **Coda, “Memory Flows,”** reflects upon the legacies of the former Panama Canal Zone, as transmitted through performances. Observing an annual ritual *romería* (pilgrimage) by West Indian Panamanians, to honor deceased relatives who helped to construct the Panama Canal by scattering rose petals into the Canal, I note: “Throughout the twentieth century and to the present, US citizens and Panamanians have structured their lives, labor, and leisure around the Panama Canal Zone. Their bodies of memory continually (re)locate the country and canal, ‘presenting’ the past within intersecting histories of nation, empire, diaspora, and world” (286). Even as the material remnants of the former Canal Zone are progressively effaced, performances offer an embodied means of transmitting the histories of the United States, Panama, and the Afro-Caribbean migrants on whose backs Canal construction largely rested.