


INTRODUCTION

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 The remarkable flowering of scholarship on the history of Africans and their descendants in the Americas produced since the Second World War has been one of the most fruitful developments of historical and sociological knowledge worldwide. The great majority of that scholarship has focused on nations and areas where African-descent populations are both recognized as such today and comprise the majority population either regionally or nationally. The islands of the Caribbean, the United States, and Brazil have been the preferred setting for this extraordinary expansion of knowledge and remain so for scholars today.

On the margins, both geographically and conceptually, of that emerging Black Atlantic framework can be found the Hispanic mainland Caribbean nations from Mexico through Central America and Panama, to Colombia and Venezuela. Here one finds little recognition, in either popular or scholarly terms, of the region's dominant role in the earliest colonial slave trade or of the fact that people of African descent constituted the majority of nonindigenous populations long thereafter. Similarly, despite (or perhaps because of) the centrality of these people and imageries of blackness in the later development of national identities and historical consciousness, these same nation-states have often countenanced widespread practices of social, political, and regional exclusion of blacks. These histories should trouble our analyses of race and diaspora. This region is not an anomaly or a marginal case, but rather the setting of historical trajectories that necessarily challenge both empirical and theoretical scholarship. Research on the isthmus must be seen as more than additive—the inclusion of forgotten peoples and histories; it has been transformative. Histories of slavery, segregation, and racism in the mainland Hispanic Caribbean underpinned the emergence of new ideals of freedom, equality, democracy,



MAP 1 Central America and the Caribbean. Map by Donald Sluter.

and honor. Yet unlike in many other regions of the African diaspora, these histories were not simply whitewashed, but so often were displaced or denied. How do we account for such results?

Each of these nations has witnessed the postcolonial development of *mestizo* or mixed-race ideologies of national identity that have systematically downplayed African roots and participation in the process in favor of Spanish and Indian antecedents and contributions. Thus both their colonial history, so central to the peopling of the Americas with Africans, and the very contributions of mixed-race populations of African descent since then have been relegated to an episodic, peripheral rendering of one after another of the individual national histories. Indeed the very success of such an assimilationist blurring of ethnic categories in the more recent past has played a large part in a relative lack of scholarly interest in research on these cases, as well as profoundly misguided popular images of their historical past. Moreover that same nationalist success story has worked as a disincentive for any understanding of the story of African Americans

in Middle America in a larger, regional framework or for scholarly discussions of these topics across those same national boundaries.

Following up on a number of conversations among researchers, we convened an international conference on the history of African Americans in Middle America at Tulane University (5–6 November 2004) with a view to developing this framework for the comparative discussion of historical experiences shared by and perhaps unique to the nations of the mainland Hispanic Caribbean. In two days of intensive discussions among colleagues across borders and disciplines we engaged each other in the common goal of revising notions of hybridity whose historical importance and precocity can hardly be overstated. One of our goals for the conference was to measure the progress of research on Afro–Central American issues by inviting the participation and critiques of scholars working in the relatively better developed cases of Mexico and Colombia.

If Mexico set the terms of this conversation with its early twentieth-century development of postrevolutionary imagery, it is no less true that each of the Central American nations pursued similarly complex processes of identity formation thereafter. However common the mestizo prototype that resulted, the conference's comparative conversations allowed us to better contextualize our individual and collective research, subjecting relatively isolated, nationally based research to commentary and criticism from foreign but similar fields and cases. Indeed overcoming the professional and geographic separation that has long characterized those working on Afro–Central America as a group, not to mention the separation from scholars working on Mexico and Colombia, was a major goal of the conference, its discussions, and the process of revising and editing these papers for publication. Thus the collection we have brought together represents a broad sampling of the pioneering work on the experiences of people of African descent and the changing meanings of blackness (and thus of necessity whiteness, Indianness, and mixedness) being undertaken by this generation's Central Americanists.

Collectively our focused reflections can make important contributions to the profound reimaginings being pursued in both the fields of African diaspora studies and Latin American history. To African diaspora studies we not only add historical depth, especially to the earliest engagements of Africans in the Americas, but address the vexing problem of how to conceptualize the relationship of the African diaspora to places where

African-descended populations do not self-identify as such or have been written out of national histories. To Latin American history we offer fruitful approaches to thinking about ethnicity and hybridity that do not fall into the twin traps of naïvely reaffirming the region's own "cosmic race" theorizings and elisions or of blindly replicating the alternately color-obsessed and color-blind thinking of overly fixed and essentialized categories of race and color.

Our understanding of *race* is clearly constructivist and nonessentialist. While attentive to African origins and the earliest of colonial times, the analyses are clearly less concerned with African continuities than with creole and American cultural innovation. While the majority of Central America's non-Indian population was no doubt of part-African descent, clearly that defined the lives of only some of the people and only at certain times. Blackness for Central Americans was and is a relational or dialectical rather than self-evident or inherent category. Ironically this is perhaps most visible in the fact that so much of formerly black or mulatto culture (defined pejoratively at the time by elites) is now considered mestizo or Pacific coastal, national, or majority culture in so many places. In noting this, however, we also reject the old assimilationist or *mestizaje* arguments that consign Africanness, slave status, and blackness itself to an unknowable, faceless past or prelude to the main event of national, mestizo-driven history. Race is constructed or imagined, of course, but also all too real, and not just in colonial or slavery times. Our evidence for this argument spans nearly four centuries and should finally lay to rest any idea that ours is a topic relevant only to the distant past. Better still, given the episodic and regionally diverse experiences of Africans and their descendants in Central America, the region offers a distinct set of opportunities to deepen our understanding of the role that cultural continuities and innovations have played in the formation of diasporan identities.

Central America also reveals the importance of place in conceptualizing blackness and diaspora. In one sense the racializing of space has long been recognized and finds detailed expression in many of our essays, especially those focused on the Atlantic coast of Nicaragua and Costa Rica. That imagery tended to emerge as part of a nineteenth-century nationalist ideology for (re)incorporating regions long semiautonomous or recently ceded to foreign enclave interests. It vigorously developed a "black as other" component, which only deepened national and other regional

self-conceptions as “anything but black.” The groundbreaking work of Peter Wade and Nancy Appelbaum on the Chocó and Antioquia regions in neighboring Colombia suggests the regional breadth of this discourse and should further invigorate our analyses of the links between regional and national identities.¹

In parallel, but not always consonant, with this racialization of space is the way individual towns and communities have been inscribed with blackness in regional and national narratives, as well as how these communities have made claims on resources both locally and nationally based on such traditions and self-images. Just as Laura Lewis’s local informants from the Costa Chica of Mexico embraced their *moreno* identity (at odds with surrounding Indians and outside whites or Spaniards) while vigorously rejecting any hint of foreign or African origin, Afro–Central Americans have often subscribed to a validating discourse of “rootedness” in (eternally) “being from here.” Place trumps race very often in this second usage, because “belonging” in the national, mestizo-driven narrative requires it, lest one be confused with those truly other, black people of the Atlantic coast. At other times, however, African descent itself can be enabling if not ennobling, such as in several colonial sugar towns, particularly those of Dominican traditions such as San Gerónimo and Amatitlán in Guatemala. In either case, whether place trumps or reinforces race, blackness or African descent is quite distinctively equated with the hyper-rootedness and thus legitimacy imagined to most powerfully characterize indigenous communities.² Nowhere is this more openly expressed, however fancifully, than in the San Gerónimo community hymn recalling a foundational Indian and black fraternity of oppression:

The residents were Indians
 and blacks their allies
 turned into slaves
 of a mistreated lineage
 A race that’s not pure
 nor a shadow its figure
 together in brotherhood
 with the Indian and the African
 Gone is that past
 we’re free and no longer slaves

we're children, brothers and sisters
of this beautiful Guatemala.³

Place proves fundamental to analyzing and understanding what Edmund Gordon has referred to as these “disparate diasporas.”

Central America offers an important testing ground for theorizations of diasporan identities and cultures, as it is simultaneously geographically compact and structurally complex. While the countries of the region share institutional, legal, and religious frameworks inherited from the colonial period, not to mention an administrative unity within the structure of the kingdom of Guatemala, they encompass diverse geographies, economies, demographics, and international relations. Furthermore, in expanding upon understandings of the African diaspora that have been dominated by North Atlantic and Anglophone scholarship, we are also pushing to move beyond the tendency in Latin America to focus on Brazil and those islands of the Spanish Caribbean that Tannenbaum long ago described as “slave societies.”⁴

PATHS NOT TAKEN

The history of research on African-descent populations in Central America has many parallels with work on Mexico, with scores of intriguing studies that failed to stir scholars from a decidedly Euro-Indian vision of the region's history. The classic works of Aguirre Beltrán on Mexico had some weaker echoes in Central America. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that there were many studies that could have been, but were not, the points of departure for sustained interest in the topic. The first bust of the cycle, then, can be assigned to Central America. These early works included classic texts by Barón Castro for El Salvador and Castro y Tossi for Costa Rica, and even turn-of-the-century volumes such as those by Ayón for Nicaragua and the later president of Costa Rica González Víquez.⁵

A particularly instructive example from Costa Rica can be found in the classic work by Samuel Stone, *La dinastía de los conquistadores* (1975). Stone's claims for elite marital endogamy and continuity of rule from earliest colonial times to the (then) present have generated debate at times, but his use of a deracialized or racially homogenizing language both es-

caped notice and reflected an unfortunate turning away from the insights available in the work of preceding generations. Those authors had long pointed not to a vaguely mestizo colonial past but to a very decidedly mulatto one, appropriate to a nation whose patron saint is a black Virgin (La Negrita) housed in the parish church of colonial Cartago's black and mulatto neighborhood of Los Angeles. Indeed the early authors were often very explicit in their own writings about the nation's origins in the bacchanalia traditions shared by whites and blacks in La Negrita's festivities.⁶

In the 1970s, at the high point of Central America's faith in a social science driven by class, not race, Stone's model claimed not only an oligarchic framework for Costa Rica's most admirable democratic achievements, but a framework in which second-class, mixed-race descendants of the conquerors driving forward the democratic process were mestizos whose smuggler origins in the cacao trade on the Atlantic coast led them to break away from Cartago to found San José. And the rest is history, as it were. Those who have documented and critiqued Stone's tendency to confuse elite biological ancestry with marital endogamy and legitimate birth have also shown that very often these were *mulatto* and not *mestizo* descendants, a point reiterated with numerous examples in the essays by Lohse and Meléndez in this volume.⁷

Guatemala's historical literature offers another example of just how powerful were the later ideological conceptions and orthodoxies of class over race, and mestizo (emerging majoritarian), not mulatto (receding or colonial and minoritarian), frameworks, eliding even the most obvious of inconvenient facts. During the upheavals of the late colonial and early independence eras both elite and commoner critics of the coastal plains populations of southwestern Guatemala and El Salvador referred to them disparagingly as mulattos, with adjectives such as "barbarous," "fearsome," or "intruder" tacked on for effect. Among their most famous military leaders in the successful Carrera revolt of 1838, the Mejía brothers of Santa Rosa, Guatemala, proudly identified themselves and their followers as "brown folk" (*gente parda*) bitterly opposed to the snobbery and oppression of capital city politicians. Carrera himself was claimed to be mostly mulatto in ancestry by one well-meaning mid-twentieth-century biographer quite out of step with the pro-mestizo ideology of the time but in keeping with the by then dominant Guatemalan tradition of avoiding

recent Indian ancestry at all costs. All of this in a nation whose capital city elite was mocked by its most famous ideologue and leader of the Liberal Revolution of 1871, the Spanish-born Miguel García Granados, as having an African heritage whose “ears showed.”⁸

Mexico would soon suffer a similar disappointment when the pioneering work of scholars such as Colin Palmer in the 1970s was met by a generation of near silence in Mexico and even more so abroad. The second bust of the cycle was felt more acutely perhaps in Mexico in the 1980s. Scholars such as Patrick Carroll in the United States kept alive interest in the field, but it was not until the 1990s that a new wave of research led to an extraordinary flowering of work on Mexico’s so-called Third Root, both at home and abroad. That work has run the gamut from archival-based colonial-period work, to widely read art history analyses, to contemporary oral history and anthropological accounts far too numerous to attempt anything like a representative listing.⁹

Central America’s most systematic published interest in African-descent populations emerged roughly simultaneously with the work that Palmer best exemplified for Mexico. The most remarkable work within that tradition was no doubt Christopher Lutz’s dissertation at the University of Wisconsin, published in Spanish in Guatemala in 1982 and much later in an expanded version in English in 1994. Similarly Afro- or mulatto-oriented research could be found in the late 1970s in work by Romero for Nicaragua and Gudmundson for Costa Rica.¹⁰ There, once again, things came to an unexpectedly abrupt end as the civil war generation in the isthmus had other concerns and as the 1970s-inspired, heavily quantified, “social-demographic-economic” historical traditions foundered at home and abroad.

Even MacLeod’s grand synthesis, *Spanish Central America* (1973), with its powerful focus on the Atlantic world vocation of the isthmus, based on slavery, cacao, and the contraband trade that fueled both, failed to generate any systematic challenge to the modern national obsession with Pacific-oriented Central America or its relegation of African-descent peoples to the Caribbean coast, otherness, and isolation.¹¹ Yet today the widely read novelist Francisco Pérez de Antón, born in Spain but long resident in Guatemala, can masterfully re-create a fictional account of the mulatto regiment of early eighteenth-century Antigua, where he affirms, “The mulattoes began to disappear from Santiago as their blood was mixed in

the exceedingly complex sea of race mixture, until it vanished completely from the urban environment. Thus, it is only right to underline the fact that their social and cultural integration was carried out without tensions of any kind.”¹² Ironically, amid this tensionless resolution even Antigua’s very architectural legacy had been reinscribed as a Spanish or white cultural legacy rather than being traceable to its mulatto master builders of the Porres family. That the University of San Carlos itself and many other beneficent institutions owed their endowments to the sugar and African slave-driven wealth of the Dominican order in the region somehow continues to escape notice entirely in such a happy-ending version of the region’s drama of *mestizaje*.¹³

Until recently scholarship on people of African descent in Central America has been caught in one of two analytical domains, worlds apart in time and place: the colonial past and the Caribbean coastal enclave. In earlier and some recent studies of colonial Central America race exists, but all too frequently as the nominal end of a project of colonial racialization. In these works these *negros*, *morenos*, *pardos*, *mulatos*, and even *bozales* are so lacking in social and cultural identity as to seem irrelevant to the more recent debates over African survival and creolization.¹⁴ Studies of Central America’s Caribbean coastal communities of African descent, by contrast, have been far more nuanced and alive to debates in African diaspora studies, but they have at the same time tended to reproduce Central American nationalist discourses that located blackness outside of national history and only marginally within national territory. Although some Central Americanists—notably Lokken, Lohse, and Cáceres in this collection—have begun to take Africa seriously in their analysis of the African diaspora, most remain more strongly tied to Latin Americanist historiography. While this has limited the conceptual scope of most scholarship on the African diaspora in Central America, it offers the advantage that as this scholarship develops it can take the more productive, dynamic, and integrative approach to the creolization debates heralded by such scholars as Tiffany Patterson and Robin Kelley, David Eltis, Philip Morgan, and David Richardson.¹⁵

Analysis of class and *mestizaje* has been the hallmark and limitation of Latin American social history, and this has made discussions between Anglophone and Latin American-based diaspora scholarship particularly difficult. Scholars working on the African diaspora in Central America,

and most of Latin America for that matter, need to more thoughtfully and fully engage with the transnational—and perhaps more important, translocal—flow of people, ideas, and resources.¹⁶ At the same time, Anglophone scholarship must contend with the ambiguous and variegated nature of black identities and experiences in Latin America. In an important agenda-setting essay on the study of the African diaspora Tiffany Patterson and Robin Kelley argue both for the continuing analysis of “the construction and reproduction of diasporic identities . . . the creation of a diasporan consciousness” and to enmesh this within the complex and crosscutting worlds of class, gender, colonialism and anticolonialism, social and revolutionary movements, and subaltern politics—all areas in which Latin Americanist literature is well developed.¹⁷

PATHS EXPLORED

The contributions to this volume offer a more complex alternative to the mythic version of the pacific, tensionless disappearance of Afro-Central Americans beginning in the colonial era itself. We have grouped our eleven essays in two broadly temporal categories: the colonial worlds of slavery and freedom, and postcolonial nation building by suppressing, remembering, and reinscribing color and race on both bodies and regions. However, while the five essays by Lokken, Lohse, Offen, Cáceres, and Komisaruk share a colonial temporal frame, they are equally inviting of thematic comparisons with later essays on the national period. The six essays by Wolfe, Gudmundson, Hooker, Putnam, Harpelle, and Meléndez pursue issues of blackness, whiteness, mixedness, representation, and nationality into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, often with surprising findings in light of the overwhelming weight of the commonsensical understandings of black disappearance or confinement to the Atlantic coast in the isthmus. However, they too show repeatedly just how intimately related many of these processes are to the all too quickly forgotten history of colonial Central America. Thus cross-temporal comparisons are perhaps as important as the more traditional comparisons between the colonial and the national.

Central America’s early and midcolonial realities were based on a very heavy reliance on both the wider Atlantic world trading system and the

African slave-descended populations brought to the isthmus by that trade. Wherever the tax man focused his eyes on a regional or international trade, there too one would find populations of African descent in some capacity. Where there were Spaniards (and as Offen's essay shows, Englishmen) there were those of African descent as well. Not only were they domestic servants, artisans, cattle ranch hands, and laborers in and independent producers of sugar, chocolate, liquor, and cloth dyes, but they were very often the blood relatives of those Spaniards as well. As Lutz long ago pointed out, those of African descent outnumbered Spaniards and Indian Spanish mestizos in the very colonial capital of Antigua until the mid-seventeenth century at least; Romero has shown the same was true in every major city of late colonial Nicaragua. Only when we accept later nationalist historiography's invitation to ignore the very different basis of colonial trade—its concentration on extremely high value to weight export and import flows, where long-distance trade involved no bulky commodities such as coffee or bananas typical of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—can one fail to recognize the ubiquitous presence of African-descent peoples in the far corners of the isthmian imperial outpost.

And present they indeed were. The essays in part I, "Colonial Worlds of Slavery and Freedom," document the extraordinary diversity of those positionings, from low-wage to high-wage economies, from the most urban to the most rural and remote settings, from Atlantic fort and port cities and regions to highland and Pacific plain sugar works. Indeed these analyses suggest that we should assume that slaves and free people of color formed key economic and social sectors in every region of the Americas until research shows otherwise. The essays by Lohse and Lokken reveal just how central Afro-Central Americans were to the most dynamic sectors—sugar and liquor in Guatemala, cacao and cattle in Costa Rica—of the midcolonial economy. And contrary to the all-powerful claim underpinning the integrationist view—that the slave trade ended early—both show that these peoples were not only slaves often born in Africa, but that they were born in knowable places and came to Central America in the hands of slave traders whose names can also be identified.¹⁸ The slaves too had names and national origins that demonstrably mattered in the new societies they helped to create, whether in Lokken's "Angolans in Amatitlán"

rendering or even more forcefully with Cáceres's royal slaves in Omoa and their overtly African naming practices on the very eve of both abolition and independence.

Komisaruk provides a view of late colonial Guatemala that demonstrates how, through slave initiative, slavery itself withered away long before formal abolition. Her findings can be compared quite directly with Hunefeldt's classic work on early nineteenth-century Lima and its environs.¹⁹ But then Lima was markedly Afro-American in the minds of nearly all subsequent analysts, while nothing could be less true of Antigua and Guatemala City in the late colonial and early independence periods, despite the British merchant traveler Henry Dunn's classic diatribe on the subject.²⁰ Where Dunn saw all non-Indians, including the ladinos and mestizos, as mulattos, later Central American authorities spared no effort to discount any such African heritage. Not surprisingly, traditional views of limited Afro-Central American populations have tended to sap efforts to historicize Afro-Central American agency. Sofonías Salvatierra was typical in this connection: "The mulatto and the black, with very few exceptions, had no greater hopes than those inspired in them by the generous ideas of *criollismo*; they formed no resistance [*fuera*], because they were very few in numbers."²¹ Rather than simply countering this denial of demography and agency, continuing research should engage the contentious and complicated social and political lives of slaves and free people of color, attentive to regional variation, without either assuming the meaning of race or denying its salience altogether.

That very slave agency and initiative highlighted by Komisaruk is also powerfully suggested by the fact that freed populations did so well in both her setting of very low wages (owing largely to the competition of forced Indian labor in agriculture, no doubt) and in the setting of extreme labor shortages and high wages of Lohse's midcolonial Costa Rica. Indeed one of the most remarkable findings of both authors is that slaves and their descendants came to control substantial monetary resources, sufficient to purchase both their freedom and a relatively favorable position for their descendants well before abolition. None exercised that agency in quite so colorful a fashion as that reported by Cáceres for Omoa, where women slaves led a boycott of meat purchases from their royal owners as a form of pressure for improved conditions. In all these colonial settings slaves' and freed people's agency emerges as an inescapable part of their escape from

bondage and their rise to more favored social positions. This argument for slow, painstaking ascent is brought full circle by Wolfe and especially Meléndez in his use of Romero's prescient expression, "the slow ascent of the marginalized," a particularly haunting reminder of just how fully the African descent of elite figures in Costa Rica and Nicaragua could be elided and indeed suppressed in more recent times.

The essays by Offen, Lohse, and Cáceres show just how deeply tied to the Caribbean slave and commodity trading world Central America was during the colonial period. They powerfully remind us once again of just how purposeful was the postcolonial myth of the Atlantic coast as an alien region to be conquered or reclaimed by the triumphant Liberals at the end of the nineteenth century. Offen's meticulous reconstruction of the complex worlds of the Mosquitia under colonial rule shows in great detail how Atlantic trading networks involved many different partners—and enemies—rarely to be easily defined by imperial or racial and ethnic identities alone. Likewise for Cáceres Omoa's royal slaves are incomprehensible without an understanding of the more or less open slave provisioning by Spanish authorities with their English enemies in Jamaica directly or through their commercial partners in Cuba. Lohse's marauding predators of the Matina Valley cacao fields are, of course, the same self-determining Sambo-Mosquito traders of the northern half of Offen's Mosquitia, while their southern brethren, the Tawira Mosquitomen, more often sought a local alliance with the mulattos of Matina and their Spanish authorities in Cartago.

All three studies show that trade relations and political alliances were extraordinarily complex and subsequently subject to myth-making of the first order. They also show how fully ethnicized or racialized became the terminology employed, with specific economic activities and political allegiances effectively racialized to such an extent that subsequent historians have had great difficulty sorting out conflicting claims about who did what and why. The rise of twentieth-century eugenics, anthropology, and sociology of race have further complicated these issues as notions of "homogeneous" mestizo nationalisms of the Pacific and "authentic" (read: historically unique) black and Indian identities on the Atlantic coast have militated against seeing their deep imbrications. The works in this collection make it clear that researchers should bridge the shared histories of slavery, trade, migration, and nation-state formation that connect the

Pacific and Caribbean regions of the isthmus and link them to the Atlantic world, seeing this history not simply or always as adversarial, but also as mutually constituted.

For Offen various activities (lumbering, fishing, transport, subsistence cropping, etc.) were racialized early on in Mosquitia, but all involved trade with “the enemy” of the moment, usually Spanish authorities in Honduras, Nicaragua, or Costa Rica. For Cáceres the entire provisioning enterprise of the Omoa fortress was part and parcel of a Caribbean trade reliant on both Spanish networks based in Cuba and English networks in Jamaica. For Lohse the mulatto and black cacao producers of Costa Rica’s Matina Valley were also investors in and traders with Nicaragua’s cattle and cacao economies southwest of Granada, extending into today’s Costa Rican province of Guanacaste. While the Machiavellian formula “The enemy of my enemy is my friend” may overstate things, it is no less true that blackness in Central America’s Atlantic-oriented world, far from occupying a fixed identity or political position, fluctuated dramatically, however much it may have also been “assigned” to certain places and activities. The irony of this fact is great indeed for the subsequent reinvention, analyzed in particular in Hooker’s essay of this collection, of Nicaragua’s and by extension the entire isthmus’s Atlantic coast as a uniquely black, fixed, nonnational space in more modern times.

Once nation-states began the process of reinscribing race and color on both bodies and regions, a novel complicating, external factor was to be added with the arrival after the 1870s of thousands of black West Indians as part of the railroad-building and banana-exporting initiatives. As never before, notions of blackness, whiteness, and mixedness, seemingly so secure in their brotherhood and invidious distinctiveness in relation to Indianness in Central America, were suddenly up for grabs once again in ways they had not been for decades, if not centuries. However, a close reading of Offen’s essay will have already alerted us to some deep historical parallels. Just as had been the case with the Spanish throughout the isthmus, the English in Mosquitia had been forced by the circumstances of their multiple weaknesses to admit many of their mixed-race children as “local whites,” many of whom would be rejected by white Belizeans after their removal there in the 1770s. Moreover both the Sambo (or mulatto) and the Tawira Mosquitomen had repeatedly asserted their own su-

periority over their English brethren in Jamaica, alternately affectionately and derisively referring to them as their “grandfather’s children.”

The essays by Putnam and Harpelle in particular explore the critical ways both blackness and whiteness were redefined by the simultaneous arrival of the banana industry’s managerial (white, largely U.S. citizens) and laboring (black, mostly anglophone West Indians) immigrant populations. However, far more than white zones (fenced, whites-only residential quarters for the managers) and black belts (plantation work sites and port and dock center cities) were to emerge anew here. Entirely new conceptions of racialized class authority emerged in highly gendered domestic and private spheres in the white zones. Showing that white women with little or no prior experience as racial masters or authority figure employers struggled to adapt in their new dual roles, Harpelle pulls back what the domestic curtain of racialized privacy had long hidden. Even more significant were the ways the serially diasporic West Indian community invented a series of markedly progressive traditions uniting blackness and a multinational or supranational modernity. Putnam thus shows not only how remarkable and far reaching was the West Indian impact in redefining black and white in Central America, but how far beyond the isthmus—from Panama to Cuba to New York, London, and beyond—these simultaneously progressive and unsettling processes first visible in Central America were clearly visible and historically transformative.

Central Americans outside the banana zones were also reinventing ways of signifying and comprehending race. Perhaps nowhere was that more visible and meaningful than in Nicaragua. Unique in the region, Nicaragua’s very existence as a nation-state was challenged not only by its own civil wars but by William Walker and the filibustering army he led in the 1850s. Along with Costa Rica, Honduras, and Panama, Nicaragua experienced the most systematic and heavy-handed influence from investor and interventionist North Americans, the purveyors of a uniquely strident and novel white supremacist doctrine throughout Central America. Thus the focus of the essays by Wolfe, Gudmundson, Hooker, and to a lesser extent Meléndez on the Nicaraguan case not only helps remedy that nation’s extraordinary isolation in terms of scholarship on the nineteenth century and early twentieth; such a sustained national focus also engages a case long thought paradigmatic of successful assimilation through

mestizaje and the disappearance or invisibility of any non-Atlantic coast blackness in that mixed-race prototype: the “myth of mestizaje” so successfully challenged by Gould and others in terms of its anti-Indian teleology but not yet in terms of its African elisions.²²

The paradoxes facing the reader may prove challenging. The very same Hispanic or mestizo legislators and intellectuals discussed by Hooker as creators of Atlantic or black otherness over the past two centuries are shown by Wolfe to have been mulatto presidents themselves, prior to their reinscription as mestizo or even white figures of commemoration, and by Meléndez to have African forbearers in even the most irreproachable (and often either pro-mestizo or white supremacist traditions) elite family trees. Gudmundson shows not only how, and how much, color mattered in the late nineteenth century, but that it was in these very same mixed-race districts of decidedly mulatto hue that the most virulent of pro-mestizaje ideologies, and the Left-Liberal politics that fed them, flourished. The politics of race had clearly shifted from the early to the late nineteenth century, yet the history of this shift remains almost unknown. Whether due to difference in class, education, historical memory, or other factors, the mulattos of early nineteenth-century León in Wolfe’s essay are decidedly not the same as those of the rural coffee-boom towns of Carazo and Granada in Gudmundson’s essay. A blanket conceit of *blancophilia* as the means to understand these differences or Afro-Central American invisibility and disappearance is simply insufficient. The research presented here shows once again how the African heritage and race of postcolonial Central Americans must be accounted for with fine-grained readings of both place and position that acknowledge how much deeper our research must plumb. The national focus on Nicaragua of many of our later essays also helps to make clear to those who would follow our lead that, contrary to popular and widespread academic belief—and the best efforts of many a government official outlawing racial or ethnic designations after 1824—the paucity of archival materials available to study those of African descent in postcolonial Central America is not the problem. Rather their lack of study is symptomatic of the deeper problem of the powerfully hegemonic and homogenizing nationalist traditions of most historical work to this point. In that sense, and the Nicaraguan focus of this work notwithstanding, the essays by Hooker and Meléndez clearly remind us that the question is not of the inability of Nicaraguans and Costa Ricans to see

any black in their union of red and white, any east coast in the west, or any Atlantic world in the Pacific plain or highlands. Central America as a whole suffers from and with the same myopia. Dealing with this deficiency rests not simply on working with the postcolonial sources, but in bridging the study of race in the colonial and postcolonial worlds.

PATHS FORWARD

The very ambitious agenda of research questions we engaged at the conference could never have been fully addressed, much less resolved, in a single gathering.²³ Substantial advances are visible in the contributions that follow, but many areas remain to be explored in depth. Perhaps most pressing remains research exploring how incorporating Central America more fully into the African diaspora implies a rethinking of the more established narratives of diaspora and race. Within the context of research on Central America it is clear that scholars must dig deeper into the politics of race and, as the critic might say, the antipolitics of race in the suppression of public recognition of categories of African descent. In addition historical and ethnographic analysis of the politics of representation surrounding ethnic or place-centered identities throughout Central America must explore both the processes of historical memory formation and transmission, be they official or contestatory, high- or low-brow, and the gendered formulations of these issues, whether interpersonal or regional, as well as the experience of them by gendered historical subjects.

One of the greatest ironies of Afro–Central American history and research into it is the fact that the greatest achievements of that population are shrouded in the deepest silence and prohibition of any ethnically specific recognition. Just as in Colombia and Mexico, where militia service and armed politics, usually but not always on the Liberal side during the nineteenth century’s interminable conflicts, were at the heart of both a civic consciousness and a set of demands for political inclusion as communities, major successes along the way were framed within the same color-blind, supraethnic citizenship discourse that could be used to deny the relevance of that same ethnically and racially rooted agency.²⁴

Research into this place- and race-specific mobilization process is just beginning and will no doubt prove critical in our evolving understanding of what black, mulatto, and *zambo* came to mean in modern Central

America. Black and mulatto Central Americans successfully defeated ethnically specific head taxation, the *laborío*, in colonial times, by highlighting (i.e., threatening to withhold) their key military service and made some of their greatest gains as citizens of national states through militia participation. Knowing this, it is only reasonable to assume, unless it can be otherwise demonstrated, that both these groups and their color were central actors and issues of isthmian politics from colonial times to the twentieth century.²⁵

There does not appear to have been any equivalent in Central America of the Afro-Colombian “democratic societies,” Leftist factions of the Liberal Party first dedicated to raising funds to liberate the enslaved and then to radical action in favor of freedmen’s rights, discovered by Sanders in the Cauca Valley region. Still, that the mulatto Liberals in Wolfe’s essay manifest the same concern with “absolute equality” that Sanders finds in Afro-Colombia’s democratic societies suggests that scholars pursue, rather than ignore, such possibilities. In any event, everywhere one looks in Central America militia membership and service, more often than not in the partisan Liberal cause, marked the single most effective means of acquiring the vote and land distributed by the state, whether from public or previously Indian village lands. And just as in Mexico, this pattern is quite logically connected back to colonial times, when militias were disproportionately black and mulatto as well as key avenues for social mobility among those of African descent.²⁶

Similarly it was precisely the Left or popular wing of the Liberal parties that most militantly demanded the suppression of distinctions among citizens based on background or condition. Thus the difficulties that subsequent historians have had in researching these populations’ history were, in large part, the creation of that same group’s successful agency. However, as we will see in several essays, this obstacle can be gotten around when one focuses in depth on individual families and social and political networks using non-census or secular official records, on towns and regions (“sugar towns” in particular) notorious for their Afro heritage, or when one discovers official mistakes or throwbacks, such as the Nicaraguan census material from 1883. Subsequent work will simply need to refuse to take no for an answer when devising archival strategies. Prior to this most recent outpouring of interest, for example, no one knew that

militia records, sugar town court cases, or even official records long sworn to silence on the subject could offer the riches already discovered.

The task of developing textual materials and a deeper analytical understanding of Afro–Central American communities’ historical memory is perhaps the least developed agenda item of our common enterprise. As part of the resurgence of ethnic politics under the aegis of Pan-Mayanism since the 1980s there has been a marked tendency to spatialize or territorialize ethnic identity and historically redemptive (not to mention contemporary political) claims. Within this framework, only the Garifuna in Guatemala, Honduras, and Belize, the Miskitu in Nicaragua and Honduras, the Creole in Nicaragua, and black West Indians in Costa Rica and Panama have tended to qualify as “historically black” in the minds of both popular political commentators and academics. In neighboring cases this has been equally notorious, but there at least the emerging work on the Costa Chica (the Pacific coast areas of Guerrero and Oaxaca) and the Gulf Coast states of Veracruz and Tabasco in Mexico and Colombia’s Chocó Province and the Cauca River Valley in Antioquia has been able to make a regional research virtue of the intellectual vice of essentializing race by territory or contemporary self-identification. Wider historical analysis will push scholars to engage with Wade’s recent call to explore both the lived and ideological forms of mixedness, to see race and nation in their lived complexity rather than simply in terms of exclusive authenticity.²⁷

Many of the essays in this collection make reference to the complex ways historical memory emerges and is subsequently shaped. Perhaps the most detailed examination we have to date comes from the Dominican slave plantation of San Gerónimo, Baja Verapaz, Guatemala. To judge by this single, perhaps extreme case, historical memory studies would reward the researcher not only with a deeper understanding of both contemporary attitudes and events in the distant past, but also with clues as to how those very events actually unfolded, often misleadingly presented matter-of-factly in the official record. It is no criticism perhaps of this late-emerging work to say that it lags far, far behind both Mayan-identity studies locally and Mexico’s Costa Chica research traditions. More important, we need to learn from those achievements, particularly from the sustained conversations between anthropologists and historians, between visual and material culture analysts and documentary historians.²⁸

The feminization of subalterns and of entire subordinate regions is now readily recognized in most historical scholarship, just as is the remasculinization or heroizing of subalterns by their supporters and leaders in modern political struggles over citizenship and its meanings. Classic studies by Gould, Hale, and Smith in particular have shown how deeply embedded such notions are for Indian and non-Indian categories in Central America.²⁹ How that dynamic played itself out involving ethnic and racial categories of African descent is, however, far from clear. Indeed to the extent that colonial sugar towns or districts were involved, female-headed households often controlled much of the wealth in the communities, owing to women's roles as domestic distillers and rumrunners, giving entirely new meanings to the traditional male-dominant rhetoric of rights and citizenship. Nevertheless traditional imageries of inferiority were, as we have seen, deeply encoded in terms denoting both blackness and disreputable femaleness and womanhood. Sorting out the many uses of gendered and racialized languages, for purposes of both exclusion and inclusion, as well as the way women and men experienced their resulting categorization will no doubt occupy Afro-Central American research for a long time to come.

That much remains to be done to fill in the historical record of blacks and blackness in Central America is all too obvious to those who convened the multidisciplinary working group at Tulane University in the fall of 2004. That the time had come for a more ambitious and comparative rendering of that history was also our firm belief. We trust that the following essays make good on that promise to contribute to documenting a long neglected historical record. Central Americans of all backgrounds, and those abroad who study their history, are invited to enjoy the essays that follow, filling in the black where only red and white could be seen before.

NOTES

- 1 Wade, *Blackness and Race Mixture*; Appelbaum, *Muddied Waters*.
- 2 Lewis, "Of Ships and Saints." Maria Elena Díaz's study *The Virgin, the King, and the Royal Slaves of El Cobre* offers a powerful example of precisely this place-focused and neo-indigenous cultural politics.
- 3 The full lyrics of the hymn are available on the Mount Holyoke College website, <http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/latam/africana.html>.

- 4 Tannenbaum, *Slave and Citizen*, 117. For important recent overviews of the broad thrust of scholarship on the African diaspora, see T. R. Patterson and Kelley, “Unfinished Migrations”; Manning, “Africa and the African Diaspora.” See also the Latin Americanist engagements of Ben Vinson III, “Introduction: African (Black) Diaspora History,” and Herman Bennett, “The Subject in the Plot.”
- 5 Aguirre Beltrán, *La población negra de Mexico*; Barón Castro, *La población de El Salvador*; Castro y Tosi, “La población de la ciudad de Cartago”; Ayón, *Historia de Nicaragua*; González Víquez, *Apuntes estadísticos*.
- 6 Stone, *La dinastía de los conquistadores*, 244–57. The classic reference to the festivities of colonial Cartago’s mulatto and white residents appears in Fernández Guardia’s *Crónicas coloniales de Costa Rica* (“La Cofradía de Los Angeles,” 156–63).
- 7 Stone’s expression “segundones” did not even openly recognize the out-of-wedlock or illegitimate birth of those involved. Mauricio Meléndez has produced detailed genealogical evidence of the African and Indian backgrounds in many of these family lines, following the mulatto descendants of the conqueror Juan Vázquez de Coronado and the mestizo children born to the indigenous woman Catalina de Tuía. See Meléndez Obando, “Descendientes mulatos del conquistador Juan Vázquez de Coronado,” and his forthcoming study *La dinastía de los conquistados*.
- 8 García Granados, *Memorias del general Miguel García Granados*, 7. For the genealogical claims about Carrera, see Cobos Batres, *Carrera*, 11. The self-description as *la gente parda* (brown folk) by the Mejía brothers was found by Ann Jefferson; see “The Rebellion of the Mita.”
- 9 C. Palmer, *Slaves of the White God*; P. J. Carroll, *Blacks in Colonial Veracruz*. Some of the most influential recent works on Mexico are Bennett, *Africans in Colonial Mexico*; Chávez Carbajal, *El rostro colectivo*; de la Serna, *Pautas de convivencia étnica*; Herrera Casasús, *Piezas de indias*; Lewis, “Of Ships and Saints”; Martínez Montiel and Reyes G., *Encuentro nacional de Afromexicanistas*; Martínez Montiel, *Presencia Africana en México*; Naveda Chávez-Hita, *Esclavos negros*; Naveda Chávez-Hita, *Pardos, mulatos y libertos*; Restall, *Beyond Black and Red*; Vaughn and Vinson, *Afroméxico*, as well as Vaughn’s website, *Afromexico*; M. E. Velásquez and Correa Duró, *Poblaciones y culturas de origen africano en México*; Vincent, *The Legacy of Vicente Guerrero*, and his website on black-Indian Mexico; Vinson, *Bearing Arms for His Majesty*. The works that analyze so-called *casta* painting in late colonial Mexico include Carrera, *Imagining Identity*; Katzew, *Casta Painting*; Velázquez Gutiérrez, *Juan Correa*.

Among the most influential book-length works on Colombia, in addition to those cited in note 1, see Arocha, *Obligados de Ananse*; de Friedemann and Arocha, *De sol a sol*; Camacho and Restrepo, *De montes, ríos y ciudades*; Helg, *Liberty and Equality*; Lasso, *Myths of Harmony*; Mosquera, Pardo, and

Hoffman, *Afrodescendientes en las Américas*; Sanders, *Contentious Republicans*; Wade, *Music, Race, and Nation*. See also the Colombian journal *América Negra*.

- 10 Lutz, *Historia sociodemográfica*; Lutz, *Santiago de Guatemala*; Romero Vargas, *Las estructuras sociales de Nicaragua*, based on his French doctoral dissertation, written in the early 1970s; Gudmundson, *Estratificación socio-racial y económica*. Examples of this earlier generation's interest in the topic include Aguilar Bulgarelli, "La esclavitud en Costa Rica"; Barrantes Ferrero, *Un caso de la esclavitud en Costa Rica*; Houdaille, "Negros franceses en América Central a fines del siglo XVIII"; Fiehrer, "Hacia una definición de la esclavitud"; Fiehrer, "Slaves and Freedmen"; Gudmundson, "De 'negro' a 'blanco'"; Leiva Vivas, *Tráfico de esclavos negros en Honduras*; Martínez Durán and Contreras, "La abolición de la esclavitud en Centroamérica"; Meléndez Chaverri and Duncan, *El Negro en Costa Rica*; Riismandel and Levitt, "Un estudio cuantitativo de algunos aspectos de la esclavitud"; Olien, "Black and Part-Black Population in Colonial Costa Rica"; Rodríguez, *The Cádiz Experiment*; Tobar Cruz, "La esclavitud del negro en Guatemala."
- 11 M. J. MacLeod, *Spanish Central America*.
- 12 "Por lo demás, los mulatos fueron desapareciendo de Santiago a medida que su sangre se diluía en el complejísimo mar del mestizaje, hasta desvanecerse por completo del entorno urbano. En tal sentido, es justo subrayar que su integración social y cultural se llevó a cabo sin tensiones de ninguna clase." Pérez de Anton, *Los hijos del incienso y de la pólvora*, 541.
- 13 On the conflictive and complex family history of the Porres architects in colonial Guatemala, see Meléndez Obando, "Las raíces mulatas." See also his photo essay on the same topic on the Mount Holyoke College website. On the basis of much of the Dominican order's financial and political empire, the source of these institutional endowments in colonial times, in slavery and sugar, see Belaubre, "Poder y redes sociales en Centroamérica"; Gudmundson, "Firewater."
- 14 On these debates, see the classic elaboration of creolization by Mintz and Price, *The Birth of African American Culture*, and the more recent and varied Africanist approaches of Thornton, *Africa and Africans*; Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*; Lovejoy and Trotman, *Trans-Atlantic Dimensions of Ethnicity*.
- 15 T. R. Patterson and Kelley, "Unfinished Migrations," 15–19; Eltis, Morgan, and Richardson, "Agency and Diaspora."
- 16 See Seigel's excellent discussion in "Beyond Compare"; T. R. Patterson and Kelley, "Unfinished Migrations," 22–24.
- 17 T. R. Patterson and Kelley, "Unfinished Migrations," 14–15, 29–32.
- 18 On the identities of the slave traders in late colonial Central America, see Cáceres, "Migraciones forzadas y mercancías."
- 19 Hünefeldt, *Paying the Price of Freedom*.
- 22 Introduction

- 20 Henry Dunn, English traveler in 1829, reprinted in Parker, *Travels in Central America*, 114, n. 105, citing page 90 of Dunn's original work as follows: "The Mulatto, or mixed race, form, in fact, the physical force of the nation. . . . The offspring of Negroes and Indians, of Whites and Indians, as well as the descendants of African Negroes, are included under the term Mulattoes, by which they are generally known; sometimes, however, they are called Mestizoes, or Ladinos."
- 21 Salvatierra, *Contribución a la Historia de Centroamérica*, 2:372.
- 22 Gould, *To Die in This Way*; Gould, Hale, and Smith, *Memorias del Mestizaje*; Gould and Henríquez Consalvi, 1932, *Scars of Memory/Cicatriz de la memoria*; Euraque, *Conversaciones históricas*.
- 23 We proposed to participants a common research agenda or set of questions, which included the following: What were the defining experiences of Africans and African Americans in colonial and national times in the region or nation studied? How have African Americans and blackness been portrayed in regional and national literatures? How and when were African Americans of mixed race defined such that their African descent no longer counted? How have the struggles and contributions of African Americans, in particular those of mixed race, been built into mestizo, national, or otherwise homogenizing narratives? Do contemporary populations identify (culturally, politically, or in other ways) with an African heritage? What texts, images, or artifacts do those populations consider emblematic of their history and identity? How have you, as a researcher, dealt with what Peter Wade has termed the challenge of interacting with the populations whose history you study, and of thinking "reflexively" about race and ethnicity in contemporary Latin America?
- 24 Sanders, *Contentious Republicans*; Mallon, *Peasant and Nation*; Guardino, *Peasants, Politics*; Gould, *To Die in This Way*; Gudmundson, "Firewater."
- 25 Lokken, "Useful Enemies."
- 26 Sanders, *Contentious Republicans*, especially chap. 3, "A New Politics"; Gudmundson, "Firewater." Vinson, *Bearing Arms for His Majesty*, makes this colonial connection most directly. For Guatemala's early independent militia and mulattos, see Jefferson, "The Rebellion of the Mita." Another important source for understanding the colonial-national connections of mulatto militia service in Guatemala is Gómez, "*Al servicio de las armas*."
- 27 Wade, "Rethinking *Mestizaje*."
- 28 Gudmundson, "Firewater." While Lewis's "Of Ships and Saints" is a model contemporary study of memory and ethnic identity inscribed in spatial and cultural terms, her research has also produced a colonial-era study of Inquisition materials: *Hall of Mirrors*. For a Guatemalan study with many parallels, see Few, *Women Who Lead Evil Lives*.
- 29 Gould, Hale, and Smith, *Memorias del Mestizaje*; C. A. Smith, "Race-Class-Gender Ideology."