

Introduction

Fictions of Blackness and Their Narrative Power

“Color-coding” in colonial Central America implied establishing a system of marking bodies, spaces, and written/visual discourses with different colors as a means of identification. Leagues away from the Spanish Crown and kilometers away from the Viceroyalty of New Spain, the social landscape of the Captaincy General of Guatemala was drafted using a palette that arranged colors according to a perspective that differed significantly from that employed to sketch populations with lesser autonomy. Sightlines, imaginary lines from the eye to the object in focus, foreclosed and annulled possibilities to ascertain certain colors and yet were also at stake in throwing other colors into relief. Those sightlines were made manifest in print, and it has also been in print that a reversal of the color-coding systems in Central America has been negotiated, creating apertures at different times in the isthmus’ history for Black Central Americans themselves to control the palette and the font used to write narratives—it is not by accident that the cover of this book is a photograph of the Nicaraguan poet Carl Rigby spray-painting the title of his digital poetic volume on a wall in Pearl Lagoon, on his own terms.

Tracking the history of Central American Blackness in post-independence and post-manumission print necessitates, however, the brief excavation of its colonial form and a conceptualization of Black agency from within coloniality before laying out the core arguments of this book. The Curse of Ham, a biblical narrative used to justify African enslavement, was likewise deployed to explain the position of Black subjects in the caste system used throughout New Spain, to which the Captaincy of Guatemala belonged until 1821. According to the story found in the

book of Genesis, a man named Noah became drunk from after drinking the wine from his vineyard one night. He lay uncovered and in a state of drunkenness when his son, Ham, entered his father's tent and beheld his bare body. Upon awakening, Noah sentenced Canaan, son of Ham (who had disgraced his father), to perpetual enslavement at the hands of his uncles, Shem and Japheth. Early Biblical interpreters would go on to associate Carthaginians, Egyptians, and Ethiopians with the "Hamite" ancestral line. God enlarge Japheth, and let him dwell in the tents of Shem; and let Canaan be his slave."¹ Juan de Torquemada, a Franciscan friar and historian, repeated the story in his *Monarquía Indiana*. Although his specific concern had been to document the oral histories of the Totonac in present-day Mexico, the Pipil in present-day El Salvador, and the Nicoya in present-day Costa Rica, he layered his accounts with descriptions of many colonial subjects, including Black peoples in the Spanish-instituted caste system. According to the friar, Ham's son begat children who "nacieron negros, y feos, como los Egipcios, y Getulos, Gente barbara, que viven, en una Region en lo interior de Libia . . . que son Negros, como carbon, y tienen la boca podrida"² (were born Black and ugly, like the Egyptians and Gaetuli, barbarous people, who live in a region in the interior of Libia . . . as black as coal and with rotten mouths). Such presumptions, based on biblical print, were largely unchallenged until the Age of Enlightenment brought Europeans to seek alternative explanations for the social hierarchies they instituted in their own kingdoms and in the colonies under their dominion.

Theories about the effect of climate on skin color and temperament, as well as hypotheses about blood quality and human character, supplanted the widely held perception of Africans' damnation. Casta paintings by Miguel Cabrera, Juan Rodríguez Juárez, and Juan Patricio Morlete Ruiz illustrated an idea of "blood-mending" and included, in fine print, a formula that progressively diluted Indigeneity—Spaniard and Indian, Mestizo; Spaniard and Mestizo, Castizo; Spaniard and Castizo, Spaniard.³ These same paintings condemned subjects of African heritage—Spaniard and Black, Mulatto; Spaniard and Mulatto, Morisco; Spaniard and Morisco, Albino; Spaniard and Albino, Torna atrás—to endless Blackness.⁴ These paintings were the legible medium through which accounts of "positive mestizaje" and "negative mestizaje" were put into circulation. The classification of bodies according to their color and, hence, their caste served to ensure enmity instead of solidarity between those lower in the social hierarchy. After all, the caste system had been a "cognitive and legal system of hierarchically arranged socioracial statuses created by the Spanish

law and the colonial elite in response to the miscegenated population in the colonies” since its inception.⁵

Intellectuals like Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora feared the transgression of the line separating the “right” people from the rest. The frequency of miscegenation led him to express his despair over its disruption of the social order: “Porque siendo plebe tan en extremo plebe . . . por componerse de indios, de negros criollos y bozales, de chinos, de mulatos, de moriscos, de mestizos, de zambaigos, de lobos y también de españoles que, en declarándose zaramullos (que es lo mismo que pícaros, chulos y arrebatacapas) y degenerando en sus obligaciones, son los peores entre tan ruin canallada”⁶ (Because being commoners so extremely commonplace . . . due to their composition as Indians, Blacks, Criollos and Bozales, Chinos, Mulattos, Moriscos, Mestizos, Zambaiagos, Lobos, and Spaniards, who in declaring themselves Zaramullos [which is the same as thieves, bandits, and cape snatchers] and degenerating in their obligations, are the worst of the ruinous rascals). Sigüenza y Góngora easily lists the castes that comprise the plebeians in his city, covering the gamut of the racial mixtures associated with Blackness. The terms *negros criollos* and *bozales*, for instance, referred at the time to Black slaves who had been born in New Spain in the case of the former term and on the African continent in the case of the latter. Mulattos were attributed equal parts Spanish and African ancestry, while *moriscos*, or quadroons as they were known in Anglophone contexts, were believed to possess a quarter of African blood and three-fourths of Spanish blood. Lobos were the progeny of an African and an Indigenous subject, while *chinos* were the fruit of a union between a lobo and an Indigenous partner. Classification was thus as much based on perception as it was on documented parentage. In fact, such was the indeterminacy of racial compositions after subsequent generations that the term *zambaigo* was often used interchangeably with *lobo* or *chino* when designating a newborn’s caste. That they would be included in the list of plebeians is not surprising. What is striking and merits further attention, however, is Sigüenza y Góngora’s belief that behavior—becoming affected, conceited, finicky, foolish, and all the other synonyms for the term *zaramullo*—could result, along with color and blood quantum, in a subject’s fall into a lower caste.

The initially well-ordered social hierarchy in New Spain had fallen into chaos, according to Sigüenza y Góngora. It had become a landscape that could only be divided into two groups: *gente decente* (respectable people) and *plebe* (plebeians).⁷ It was a society in which the distribution of wealth had permitted descendants of Africans to contribute to

and benefit from the colonial economy: “castas with buying power daily flouted Spanish sumptuary regulations.”⁸ Though some Black women and mulattas, for instance, could face confiscation of their property if they wore gold jewelry, pearls, or full-length embroidered *mantas*, affluence across classes had begun to erode the old distinction between Spaniards and castas. Determined to denounce the burgeoning intimacy between castes, Sigüenza y Góngora nonetheless captures for his readers a subtle change in the rubrics of color-coded spaces in the Viceroyalty of New Spain. He was witnessing and contributing to a narrative in which the signposts related to Blackness were changing across the important cities of the Viceroyalty of New Spain, which at the time included Mexico City (once known Tenochtitlán) and Santiago de los Caballeros in Guatemala (once known as Iximché). When Mexico and Guatemala became independent nations, these cities and their peoples did not lose their importance. Rather, they became cultural epicenters in which ideas took shape and circulated through print media outward into smaller rural towns. By that time, however, Afrodescendants in urban areas had ceased to be classed according to phenotype, and many had been absorbed into the category of *gente decente* (decent people) of the new nations.

What happened to these descendants of African slaves trafficked into Central America? Why has their destiny in the Central American Caribbean rimlands been markedly distinct from that of Black peoples in the Caribbean islands? Why are the stories about Blackness plotted in the Pacific coastal areas distinct from the stories charted in Caribbean coastal areas? *Black in Print* is a study of these questions. Mainstream print media, I argue, has since the nineteenth century had the powerful effect of making Central American Black experiences first disappear into home-grown *mestizaje* and then malignly reappear to divide and conquer the “decent people” of Central America. I likewise find that the independent print media stream that begins to appear in the region in the early twentieth century brings Blackness back to the center of national discourses, at times in celebratory multicultural tones and at others as part of the isthmian and regional movement that asserts the powerful legacy of Black life and thought in Central America.

Black in Print puts Central American conceptions of race and ethnicity under a microscope, though its observations are applicable to a myriad of discourses about Blackness that have taken shape throughout the Americas. From Mexico to the United States, from Canada to Argentina, from Haiti to Ecuador, from Cuba to Brazil, narratives about Blackness have shape-shifted according to the sociohistorical and political

demands for fresh national narratives to better identify the welcomed and excluded inhabitants within national boundaries. For that reason, this book honors the critical contributions of Lélia Gonzalez's theory of "América" and sheds light on the enduring Indigenous legacy of Blackness in the Americas, despite centuries of loss, dismissal, and disparagement on a hemispheric scale. As Gonzalez writes in her essay, "A Categoria Político-Cultural de Amefricanidade": "Já no caso das sociedades de origem latina, temos o racismo disfarçado ou, como eu o classifico, o *racismo por denegação*. Aqui prevalecem as 'teorias' de miscigenação, da assimilação e da 'democracia racial.' A chamada América Latina que, na verdade, é muito mais ameríndia e amefricana do que outra coisa, apresenta-se como o melhor exemplo de racismo por denegação." (In the case of societies of Latin origin, we have disguised racism or, as I term it, racism by denial. Here, the "theories" of miscegenation, assimilation and "racial democracy" prevail. The so-called Latin America, which, in fact, is much more Amerindian and Amefrican than anything else, manifests itself as the best example of racism by denial.)⁹

Given the prevailing denial of Blackness in Central American contexts (and in many sites in mainland Latin America), Blackness after manumission became what Ben Vinson III has called "a moving target." As Vinson III explains in his observation about Blackness in Latin Americanist research: "Quite simply, for us, the contexts in which Blackness is produced often eschew the very category of study, and among Latin American diasporans themselves, Blackness possesses a proverbial fluidity. As scholars we are well aware that within our region, Blackness is simultaneously segmented, denied, and reluctantly embraced—all while morphing into something that seemingly stretches beyond Blackness. Herein lies a great research opportunity."¹⁰ Gonzalez found it to be an opportunity to engage with a "gigantesco trabalho de dinâmica cultural que não nos leva para o lado do atlântico, mas que nos traz de la e nos transforma no que somos hoje: *amefricanos*" (gigantic labor of cultural dynamics that does not take us to the other side of the Atlantic, but brings us away from there and transforms us into what we are today: *Amefricans*).¹¹ These are the discursive points of entry into print media with which I now proceed.

Independent Narratives

Narratives about Blackness in Central America have been shaped by both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic forces in situ. They were devised in

the isthmus itself, created as the republics were born and, more specifically, put into circulation through the principal influencing print media of every historical period post-independence. To illustrate more clearly, I turn to the events that led to manumission in the isthmus. The *moreno* (Afrodescendant) populations in the province of San Salvador and the province of Guatemala were crucial constituents to take into account in January 1822 when José Matías Delgado of the Liberal party submitted his petition for the abolition of slavery before the Salvadoran junta over which he presided.¹² Afrodescendants, he reasoned, had been active in the independence movement.¹³ He determined that as political actors, they merited the same rights as other categories of (non-Indigenous) people who could exercise their rights as citizens. Propelled by this shift in the hegemonic narrative, six enslaved men from Trujillo (Honduras) surnamed Álvarez, Morejón, Berardez, Hota, Cabal, and Navarro presented their petition for freedom in September 1823. In an eloquent statement, they argued that the freedom of man was an “inestimable joya” (priceless jewel) without which he could not partake in the good of the social pact offered to his equals. They founded their observations in religious scriptures arguing that God did not authorize the servitude imposed upon wretched slaves. Furthermore, they appealed to the fiscal tenets of slavery, stating, “No es otro mas que la relajada avaricia de los hombres que, por aumentar sus caudales, han infestado las desgraciadas costas de la Africa, esclavizando a sus habitantes, que en sentido claro, no es otra que robarles la preciosa joya de su Libertad.” (It is nothing but the extravagant greed of men who, to fill their coffers, have infested the wretched coasts of Africa, enslaving her inhabitants, which is clearly nothing other than stealing the precious jewel of their Liberty.)¹⁴ The five [Black] men had developed a persuasive argument appealing to the Central American National Congress on the basis of their inalienable right to freedom.

They were not alone. Across Central America, many of the Afrodescendants who remained enslaved gave their reasons in print for seeking freedom. One group of six men, from the Santo Domingo Convent in Palencia (Guatemala) presented the following petition: “Somos los mas infelices, anaden, pero conocemos que el oro es una tierra amarilla y que la plata es tierra blanca. La Asamblea aprecia a los hombres, y no hace caso de la tierra por blanca o por amarilla.” (We are the most wretched, but we understand that gold is a yellow earth and that silver is a white earth. The Assembly appreciates men and does not distinguish between land, whether it be white or yellow.)¹⁵ The print material about Blackness

written by the aforementioned petitioners in Honduras, Guatemala, and in other Hispanophone Central American nations in those years positioned Afrodescendants as political actors in the central plot of an isthmus undergoing a change in character from a colonial outpost to a collective of independent republics. The print material was likewise based on the theme of God-given, inalienable rights to all men. Despite being Black and enslaved, they had taken pen to paper and argued for themselves that they wished to be recognized as free men, capable of reason, and willing citizens of the new nation.¹⁶ Like the Afrodescendants before them who sought legal avenues to challenge their racial designation as *negros*, *mulatos*, and *morenos* and to bring to an end to the taxation resulting from such identifiers, these enslaved men used petitions as the means to affirm their own humanity and ability to reason. Their documents, called *gracias al sacar*, have become a part of the archive that documents the experiences and thoughts of Black slaves as a matter of national/regional historical fact.¹⁷ The voluminous writing bore fruit when Article 13 of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Central America went into effect on April 24, 1824, making manumission official in the five republics of Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica. African enslavement had been declared illegal in Gran Colombia—of which Panama was still a part—many years earlier, though many Black individuals remained enslaved, and it took many more years for full emancipation to be achieved.

At the time, Central America's Conservative party was comprised of whites, their allies, and the bishop of Central America, who supported enslavement and the colonial Spanish administration. The Liberal party, on the other hand, consisted primarily of *gente de color* (people of color). Within this context, many Afrodescendants became famous for their involvement in the fight for the region's independence and entered other sociopolitical spaces to ensure their freedom in the emerging nations no longer as *people of color*, but as *citizens*. Mauricio Meléndez Obando evaluates the context:

With Independence and the former substitution of socioracial categories with the term *citizen*, afroestizos finally witnessed the elimination of legal and social barriers justifying their centuries-long exclusion from the halls of power. Some did not fail to take advantage of the opportunity: they had access to municipal offices, the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government, and the high clergy throughout Central America.

Now we know the answer to the question frequently posed to those of us who study slavery in Central America: But what happened to the slaves of the colonial period?¹⁸

In their bureaucratic transformation from *negros* to *morenos* to *citizens*, liberals established an ideological landscape that reinforced the stereotypes of a Conservative white *criollo* class, staunchly old guard, that vehemently opposed progress and the philosophy of liberalism. As the demographic majority in the Liberal party, Afrodescendants in the Hispanophone areas of Central America consolidated the *negro-moreno-turned-mestizo* hegemonic ideology that nurtured a color-blind narrative in the five first Central American nations in 1824. There, belonging hinged less on one's racially ambiguous phenotype and more on one's ideological, linguistic, and geographic affiliation. In this scheme, Afrodescendants in Pacific cities were members of the citizenry, quickly establishing the stories of the new nation-states, while Afrodescendants residing on the Caribbean coast were invisible in the print of the independence period. Whether Afrodescendants could be conceived of as de jure and/or de facto citizens quickly came to depend on place of origin, language spoken, and the historical period in question. The designation of de jure and de facto citizenship and even de jure and de facto foreignness carried a narrativized element relating to an individual's perceived degree of national contribution. Put succinctly, Afrodescendants in principal cities were folded into narratives that supplemented ideologies about territory, resources, and legacy posited by the Liberal parties in the new nations.

A Moving Target in Time

As sociopolitical and economic factors changed, so too did the stories of Central America's [Black] citizenry.¹⁹ With time, the converging factors of space, time, and the changing semantic meaning in Central America led to denial of Blackness in plain print. Afrodescendant men who obtained their freedom—both before and after manumission—held positions in cities as artisans or craftsmen, contracted by the upper classes to fashion objects that competed with those made in the Old World.²⁰ Others remained in the countryside, tilling their own land and overseeing their own haciendas. Movement and dispersal were such constants that even travel narratives written by outsiders, such as that by Jacob Haefkens

(1832), provide their readers with sketches of these Black men and women who moved across the terrain and through the echelons of colonial society.²¹ The increasing number of Afrodescendants in skilled professions throughout the Captaincy of Guatemala led to a paradigm shift as an increased number of Afrodescendants began to appear in church registries and official documents not as *negros* but as *morenos* and, with time, as *mestizos*. Absorption through *mestizaje* became one of the central fictional elements in the narratives of Blackness constructed in the five first independent nations of the isthmus.²²

As an intellectual with the express intention of relating his account to the king of the Netherlands in 1832, Haefkens would have been keenly aware of the writings on race promulgated during the Enlightenment, particularly Johann Friedrich Blumenbach's *On the Natural Varieties of Humankind*. The text posited that there were five races belonging to humankind: Caucasian, Mongolian, Ethiopian (Black), American (Indigenous), and Malay. The four latter races were said to have degenerated from the ideal Caucasian stock. In his account, Haefkens declares that the Central American population "comprende personas de todas las razas imaginables, pero se divide en tres clases principales" (includes people of all imaginable races, but is divided in three main classes): the white upper class, which enjoyed such luxuries as comfortable homes, fine clothing, excellent horses, and delicious food; the middle class—racially unclassified—which had stable work, clean clothes, and enough food; and the Indigenous, who were exploited and subjected to forced labor despite their legal condition as free individuals.²³ The category *mestizos* caused trouble for Haefkens, who recognized that in this context, unlike Europe, Afrodescendants were not relegated to the bottom rung of the social ladder. This class of people, he wrote to his king, consisted of descendants of whites and Indians (his term for Indigenous people) who were known as *ladinos* and added that mixed white and Black individuals, and other combinations of ethnoracial mixtures were also considered *ladinos*. Anyone with a *ladino* classification, reported Haefkens, was distinct from the strata of pure "Indians," reported Haefkens.²⁴ To soften the message, Haefkens adds a note stating that he does not mention Blacks as a racial category because their number is too low to be mentioned. Though his king would be unlikely to imagine the scene, Haefkens understood that in Central America, Afrodescendants constituted the majority of the populace, and they were on par with other *ladinos* afforded the opportunity to climb the social ladder.

Whereas their forefathers and foremothers had been enslaved and consequently defined by Spaniards as *negros bozales* and *negros criollos* in the colonial period, Afrodescendant citizens entered marriages and careers with the dignity ascribed to any other participant in the wars of independence.²⁵ These [Afrodescendant] citizens created an imaginary that increasingly posited their society not as Africanized, but *ladino*: a term that exists today as the predominant popular and official descriptor for non-Indigenous peoples in Guatemala.²⁶ Lowell Gudmundson reminds us that census takers in the nineteenth century “followed what they understood to be their superior’s intentions in documenting a presumptive process of national integration via mestizo majority.”²⁷ Mulattos and Blacks in the isthmus henceforth “disappeared” in technical writing before disappearing in other print genres. Moreover, “Black was something one did not lightly accuse another of being in Nicaragua or anywhere in Central America, at least in public. More epithet than descriptor, it ranked right up there with other challenges to honor or masculinity as fightin’ words.”²⁸ *Mestizo* became the category used with greater frequency as the use of *negro*, *moreno*, *zambaigo*, *tente-en-el-aire*, *tornatrás*, *no-te-entiendo* became outdated markers of phenotype and instead an insult. Bureaucratic lightening and narrative passing techniques after independence concomitantly resulted in a great decline in the number of Afrodescendants who would have self-identified or been identified by census takers as such. Rubén Darío (discussed in chapter 1) would be a clear example of an Afrodescendant who understood the power and assumptions about class, character, and national belonging implicit in the term. *Mestizos* who had Afrodescendant ancestry had a place in all the professions and small-scale business endeavors available in Central American cities; *negros* and *mulatos* did not have the same privilege of belonging.

Throughout Central America, *mestizaje* was embraced as a post-independence means of diluting Indigeneity: from recruiting German coffee farmers in Guatemala, to attracting Muslims in El Salvador, to opening borders to Chinese immigrants in Panama, the regional intention was to reduce the impact of Indigeneity (understood as barbarism, following the writings of Latin American thinkers of the epoch) in the gene pool of the citizenry as the new nations moved toward progress. After all, as Peter Wade observes, “Elite and literate expressions of mestizo identity harbor within themselves a tension between sameness and difference, rather than simply being homogenising expressions pitted against a subaltern con-

sciousness of difference.²⁹ In this framework, Black alterity in the first years of Central American independence was perceived as a means of attenuating the force of Indigeneity that remained present through the Spanish colonial period. Seen thus, a *mestizaje* that could incorporate Blackness was the ultimate requisite of a successful republic aiming to showcase itself as liberal and progressive. That said, political elites were acutely aware of how their populations were perceived by the US and European elites. Juliet Hooker explains that the segmentation of area within national boundaries facilitated the ideological making of *mestizo* cores that subtly enfolded Blackness within their parameters. Drawing from print archival material pertaining to Nicaragua, she states:

The racialization of some regions claimed as part of the national territory as Black or Indigenous and therefore “inferior” or “savage” served to legitimize the political disenfranchisement of their inhabitants by Nicaraguan and political elites during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The mapping of race onto space simultaneously fueled and facilitated the spatialization of race. Thus the designation of some regions of the country as the only ones where racial others resided made it possible to imagine the remaining areas of the country as lacking any kind of racial difference. . . . It also served to legitimize the notion, which persisted well into the twentieth century, that citizens of western regions of the country were peculiarly entitled to exercise political power in the [nation] as a whole, and over “uncivilized” regions in particular.³⁰

Beyond Nicaragua, other nations expressed the same insistence on *mestizo* competence and progress germane to the cities powered by *mestizos* closer to the Pacific coast. Central America had firmly closed its chapter on the colonial period; with that epistemic shift, Blackness was no longer an issue in the cities that mattered to the civilized republics. As Hooker finds with Nicaragua, the reminder of that alterity within emerged when the country entered into a dispute with Great Britain for the Mosquito Coast. Elsewhere in Central America, as the chapters in this book highlight, political turning points likewise ushered keen awareness of Blackness (and Indigeneity) and in more cases than not, resulted in the sharp rejection of *lo negro* (and *lo indio*), which operates largely at the level of slur more so than phenotypical identification.

Hooker's observations are key to the regional consideration I give to narratives of Afrodescendance in this book. In Central America, the Caribbean coastal strip is perceived as *the* site of Blackness in the region. Blackness can be literally seen there, while Blackness in the Pacific coastal areas and in the highlands is utterly unseen even by their own Afrodescendants. Unlike the Indigenous populations that were managed by *mestizo* and white Central Americans through a system of debt peonage well into the 1980s, Afrodescendants in the multilingual Caribbean coastal areas lived on the margins of the Hispanicized Central America (map I.1). Given the lack of roads connecting areas closer to the Pacific

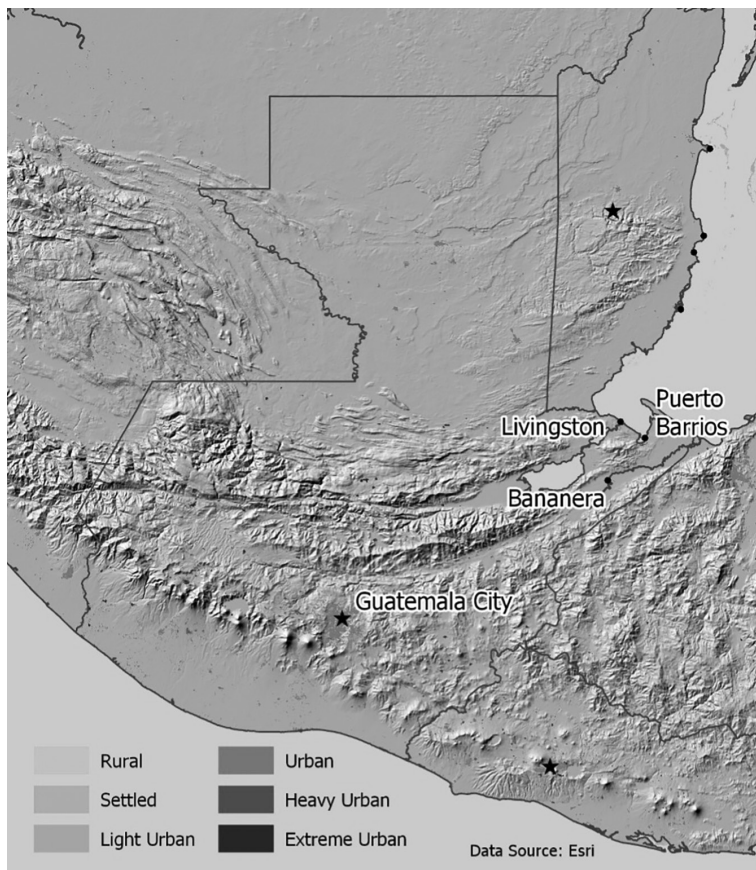


Map I.1. Central American Caribbean Coastal Towns. *Source:* U-Spatial.

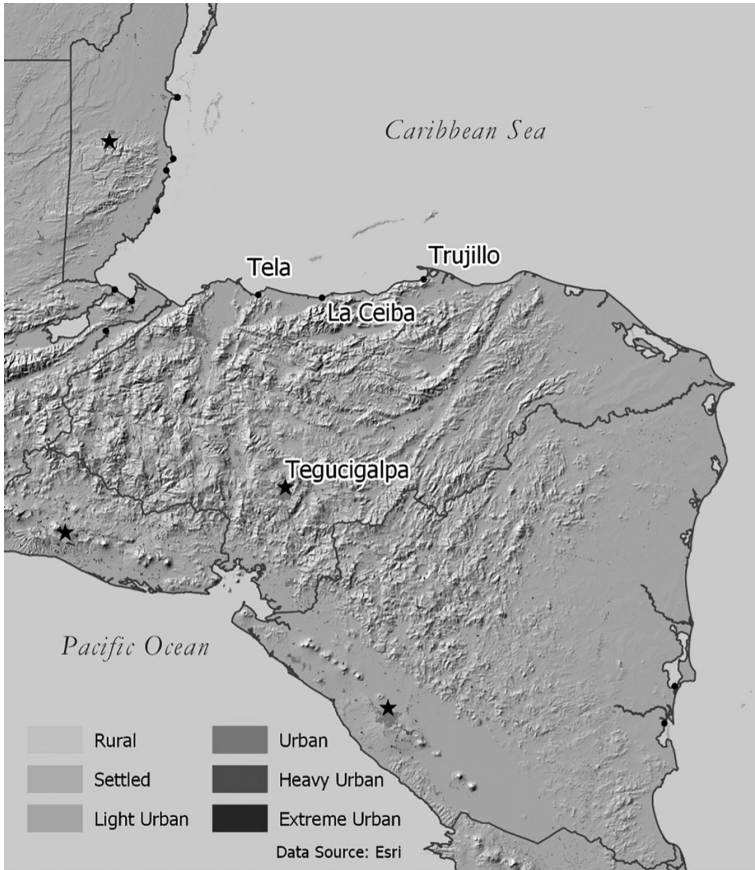
to areas closer to the Caribbean, travel to “Black sites” was limited, and Afrodescendants could disappear altogether from their fellow Central American citizens’ ken. Furthermore, legislation was used to literally keep Black peoples in place, as many countries of the isthmus established strict immigration laws targeting Afrodescendants.

A Moving Target in Space

Geography was a determining factor in the division of resources within the five United Provinces of Central America. Determining the apportionment of land and resources that would go to each province and how the incipient nations could pose a unified resistance to existing (Mexican and British) and emerging (United States) political threats was central to creating a sense of commonality among leaders and elites from north to south within the isthmus. Terrain was conceptualized as having racial/ethnic/linguistic properties resulting in a homogenizing voice from the capitals of the provinces: the United Provinces of Central America were Hispanicized locales and would continue to foment their unity through the Spanish language and Catholicism. It was a posture that presumed that Afrodescendants had *already* become part of the populace, the body politic, and economic order through linguistic and social “integration.” By virtue of the non-existent infrastructure connecting Pacific and Caribbean coastal areas, it was easy for [*mestizo* and white] Central Americans to imagine Blackness as something outside of their nations and region. National projects involved obtaining the nutrient-rich soils of Indigenous lands, controlling Pacific ports, and harnessing the coffee-picking labor of landless Indigenous peoples, leading to a *convivencia* of the [white and *mestizo*] ethnolinguistic majority that required proximity to Indigenous peoples in order to better dispossess them of their land. In Guatemala, [Black] towns like Livingston, Puerto Barrios, and Bananera register at 0, 33, and at 753 feet above sea level, respectively, in comparison to the towering capital of Guatemala City, which is located at 4,900 feet above sea level (map I.2). The pattern is repeated in Honduras, where the capital of Tegucigalpa is nestled in the hills between mountains at 3,248 feet above sea level in comparison to the [Black] towns of Trujillo, La Ceiba, and Tela, which are located at 114, 10, and 10 feet above sea level, respectively (map I.3). Afrodescendants were systematically restricted to the lowland undesirable “elsewhere” of their Central American nations, keeping them unseen across the other side of mountain ranges well into the twentieth century.



Politically and economically, the Pacific coast and mountain ranges were an early strategic area for [*mestizo* and white] coffee producers who exported it through the harbors located on the shores of the Pacific. Controlling the Indigenous (*campesino*) labor force—a group they considered distinct from the more numerous ethnically ambiguous *mestizo* citizenry—created a sense of national identity as national economies and regional financial networks were built.³¹ The geographically and linguistically distinct “Black” groups that remained in lowland Caribbean areas existed outside of these larger socioeconomic networks. It was not until 1903 when Panama, with its substantial Afrodescendant population, was brought into the isthmian Hispanic fold that Nicaraguan president José Santos Zelaya and other Central American politicians began to take an



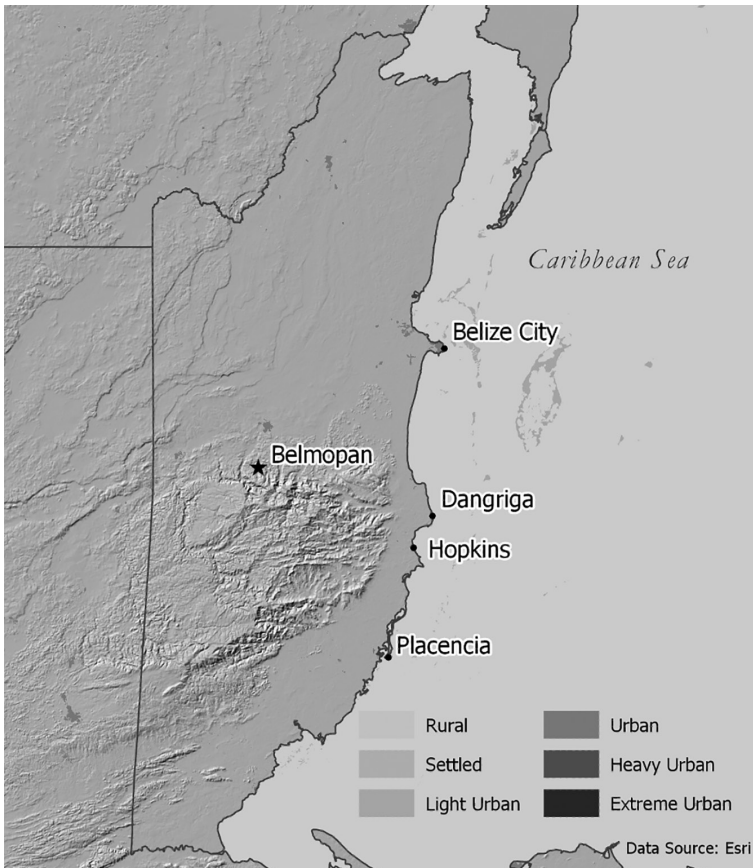
Map I.3. Honduran Caribbean Coastal Towns. *Source:* U-Spatial.

interest in claiming and Hispanicizing the hitherto culturally British and linguistically Anglophone Central American Caribbean coast.³² As a result, discourses about a distinctly Black presence in Central America only reemerged when Hispanization, intensified nation-building, and territorial expansion all occurred in the [Black] towns that had hitherto been culturally and economically influenced by the British. As this distinct lowland Caribbean coastal topography and climate area was incorporated into the Central American nation, so, too, was the Black populace who was perceived as ethnolinguistically undesirable to the nation.

Thus, the isolated, unincorporated populations that had been essentially ignored by Central American administrations began to be “seen” and recognized as “Black.” As United States–based banana companies settled

in to make a profit through the banana trade from isthmian Caribbean ports, places like Belize (Belize City, Hopkins, Placencia, and Dangriga), Guatemala (Bananera, Livingston, and Puerto Barrios), Honduras (Tela, Trujillo, and La Ceiba), Nicaragua (Bluefields and Pearl Lagoon), Costa Rica (Limón), and Panama (Bocas del Toro and Canal Zone) were literally put on the map. They became the most important ports in the early twentieth century, and because these critical economic sites were home to a high concentration of Anglophone Afrodescendant peoples (including Garifuna, Miskito, and West Indian peoples with heritages dating back to ancestral enslavement in British Caribbean islands), they were at the center of heated debates when anti-imperialist media increased in circulation. Those [Black] towns on the Central American Caribbean coast were, and remain today, multilingual areas. These locales are polylinguistic areas in which the Spanish language arrived much later than it did in the highlands and the Pacific coast. In these [Black] towns, English, Creole, and Garifuna are just three of the languages in contact with Spanish. As an ethnically diverse nation with Kriol—a language born in conditions of West African enslavement—as its lingua franca, it is unsurprising that Belize would both be excised from Central American regional imaginaries and be the sole country in the isthmus with its first capital, Belize City, resting on the shore of the Caribbean Sea (map I.4). Although Belmopan became the capital after 1961, Belize City was the capital from 1836 and remains the cultural center of Creole culture and the Belizean Kriol language.³³

I emphasize the existence of plurality even within the isthmian double narrative (described in the preface of this book) because the stories that have circulated about Blackness at different points in Central America's post-independence history has not been uniform. The narratives—organized by three spatiotemporal themes but further isolated into five distinct plotlines from the nineteenth century to the present day—came to determine whether all, some, or none of the descendants of West African slaves, Creoles,³⁴ Afro-Indigenous peoples,³⁵ and West Indian immigrants³⁶ would be subjected to the narratives about Blackness in the Central American countries in the isthmus. Degrees of proximity to capitals and linguistic criteria played a central role in incorporation of Afrodescendants and even in the cultural dis-incorporation of Belize from the Central American regional fabric. Hispanophone Afrodescendants continued to be part of the social, political, and military leadership of post-independence Central American societies. While political enemies in the United States and Great Britain mocked the region for its Afrodescendant politicians, these same



Map I.4. Belize and Belize City, Capital of British Honduras from 1638 to 1961. *Source:* U-Spatial.

leaders were participants in the elite circles that defended liberalism, the constitution of the United Provinces of Central America, and their capital city in Guatemala.³⁷ Yet, unlike the Afrodescendants on the Pacific coast who passed into all echelons of independent Central American society, multilingual Afro-Indigenous and West Indian groups in Caribbean coastal areas in the twentieth century were quite literally condemned to the fringes of their respective nations.³⁸ The Miskito, for example, continue to reside in Caribbean coastal communities in Honduras and Nicaragua. The Afro-Indigenous Garifuna have continued to live in coastal towns in Belize, Guatemala, and Honduras. The West Indian community—recruited

in the early twentieth century to work on the banana plantations across Central America and the Canal Zone in Panama—has thrived in those very same coastal areas. Belize, the sole nation without a Pacific coast, is home to the highest number of inhabitants who identify as Creole in the isthmus. It is also the sole place where Kriol, a language born in the context of enslavement, is the lingua franca for all citizens, regardless of phenotype and cultural background.³⁹

This became the premise of plots in which Blackness could be at once racial and ethnic, fictional and factual, seen and unseen, and defined in both essentialist and socially constructed terms. Consequently, the Hispanophone countries of the isthmus exemplify the phenomenon noted by several scholars, including J. Lorand Matory as quoted in Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s *Black in Latin America*: “North Americans tend to be as blind about the centrality of class in our society and vigilant about the centrality of race as Latin Americans are vigilant about the centrality of class and blind about the reality of race.”⁴⁰ Despite the centuries of research into class-based conflict, Central America remains impervious to the ways that racialized narratives became institutionalized over time. For that reason, in all isthmian countries with the exception of Belize, the collapse of Blackness into *mestizaje* was held as an indicator of parity among men and republican civility. Therein lies a fallacy. And, as both Rahier and Hooker observe with respect to the region today, the multicultural policies that have emerged in the twenty-first century are merely a legal redress to the ideological exclusion caused by the ongoing myth of *mestizaje*.⁴¹ Multiculturalism is not enough to emplace Blackness as an ingredient in ideological biologies of the isthmus.

Axes and Coordinates of Blackness

Forever elusive and thus a challenge to entrap due to early narratives of disappearance, Blackness has continued to change coordinates even as it changed from (1) being incorporated into *mestizaje* after 1824, (2) challenging *mestizaje* in the early twentieth century, and (3) coexisting with Indigeneity as a subaltern subjectivity in these first two decades of the twenty-first century. These are points at the intersection of an x-axis that marks the “when” and a y-axis that marks the “where” of Blackness in Central America. After all, as Michelle M. Wright notes in *The Physics of Blackness*, Blackness is often examined as a “what,” though it operates more

precisely as a “when” and “where.” Blackness cannot be conceived as a common denominator that links Black presence across categories; instead, the question of Blackness requires “focusing on the phenomenology of Blackness—that is, *when* and *where* it is being imagined, defined, and performed and in what locations, both figurative and literal.”⁴² Not only is the “meaning” of Blackness an epoch-specific attribution, but Blackness itself is experienced as a condition subject to the limits and possibilities afforded by the site and moment in which it is performed and read. In much the same way that the contours of Blackness have changed in the history of US media, so too has Black experience in Central America undergone similar “epistemic” transformations evident in the media of the region.⁴³ Sociopolitical waves of change have created the historical contexts that foreground narratives about Blackness and Black experience in three distinct regions within Central America: the Pacific coast, the central highlands, and the Caribbean coast. How do time and space converge to release energy in print so powerful as to rearrange the sightlines of citizenry into discreet cartographic zones?

In *México’s Nobodies*, B. Christine Arce explains that a nation’s “nobodies” make their way through the cracks caused by groundbreaking events, and that when they do, they are displayed in different trappings in order to respond to the needs of the period in question. Like Blackness in Mexico, Blackness in Central America has been thrown into relief at poignant historical moments, and at others, it has been submerged into national and regional oblivion. These matters are, as one critical observer has noted, historical questions, since the meaning and nature of inclusion, exclusion, and recognition are dependent on a variety of social, political, economic, and cultural factors that themselves change.⁴⁴ These observations direct us back to Wright’s tenet that Blackness and Afrodescendance have a spatiotemporal quality that renders the meanings and *markers* of Blackness as alternately a “race” or “ethnicity”—as well as the philosophical/legal/political grounds for their relevance and applicability—as factors that vary over the course of time. Consider Wright’s theory more closely: “Becoming aware of how spacetime operates in our everyday and more formal discourses on identity can help us retrieve those identities that have been consigned to the margins as ‘rare’ and ‘unique’ and bring them into their true place as a site for enriching intersections with other bodies, other times, and other histories. This mechanics, or ‘physics,’ of Blackness ticks in every one of us, because at any given moment we are in the hearts of all sorts of human diasporas.”⁴⁵ The extent to which

Afrodescendants were included or recognized during the colonial period can be determined by delving into a history that has historically only provided Indigenous, *mestizo*, and white subjects a much more fixed place in national narratives.⁴⁶ In this book, I work with the variables of time and space that Wright and Arce discuss in their theories about Blackness as axes on a graph over which to determine the coordinates of Blackness at distinct moments in the history of the isthmus. To their discussion, I add the variable of language.

Print, as shall become clear in the chapters that follow this introduction, has inscribed Black bodies within imagined temporal, linguistic, and geographic boundaries, whether these be regional, national, or continental. Saidiya Hartman suggests in *Lose Your Mother* that this is because the enslaved ancestors of Afrodescendants in the Americas were torn from their families, homes, countries, and continent, perpetuating their condition as plotted strangers in national stories. The case of Juliana Deguis, popularized in the podcast *Radio Ambulante* in 2018, further illustrates this situation by presenting us with a woman whose point of origin and mother tongue is questioned in the Dominican Republic, despite the fact that she has always lived on the Dominican and not the Haitian side of the border. Despite their voices emerging in different languages and nations, Hartman's and Deguis's intellectual and experiential contributions to the literature on Blackness, language, geography, and heritage-home capture the "false rubrics" (per Michelle M. Wright) of Black hypostatic entity imposed on Afrodescendants. Their inventions also highlight the ways that a narrative of rightful belonging is replaced by a narrative of "associative belonging." In the same vein, hypostatic conceptualizations in US media have decreed, for example, that Blackness *is* urban instead of rural. To speak of Black country music in Texas or Black farmers in rural Virginia is as disruptive to mainstream notions of Black associative belonging as it is to read the Black characters crafted in Stephen L. Carter's novels.⁴⁷ Like US media's attribution of urban spaces as the locales of Blackness, Central America has designated its Caribbean coast as a strip of land in which Afrodescendance can be ascribed and circumscribed. It is a space where the miscegenation laws imposed by the British distinguished it from, first, the Pacific coastal areas where *mestizaje* became normalized and a foundational platform for creating Central American citizenry and, second, from the remote highland areas where many of the isthmus's Indigenous people were forced to flee to escape genocide.⁴⁸ It is this existence of a distinct space within the national context that creates the identity that Emily