Drew University

College of Liberal Arts

The Life of the Invisible Black Hercules: West Indian Migration, Labor, and Communal Identity in Panama, 1881-1949

A Thesis in History
By

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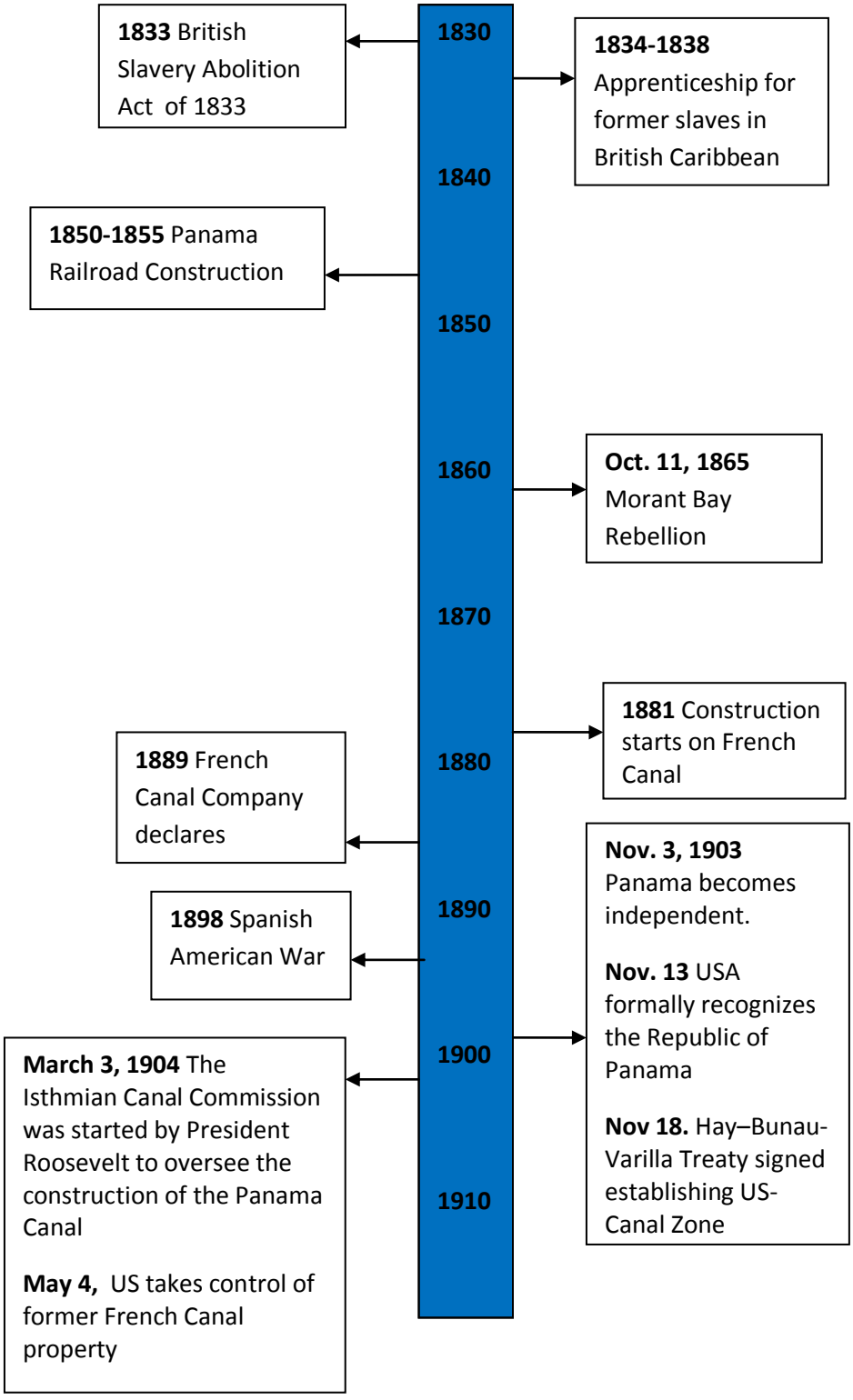
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of
Bachelor in Arts
With Specialized Honors in History
May 2014

To all the West Indian workers whose stories have been lost in the pursuit of freedom


1830
1840
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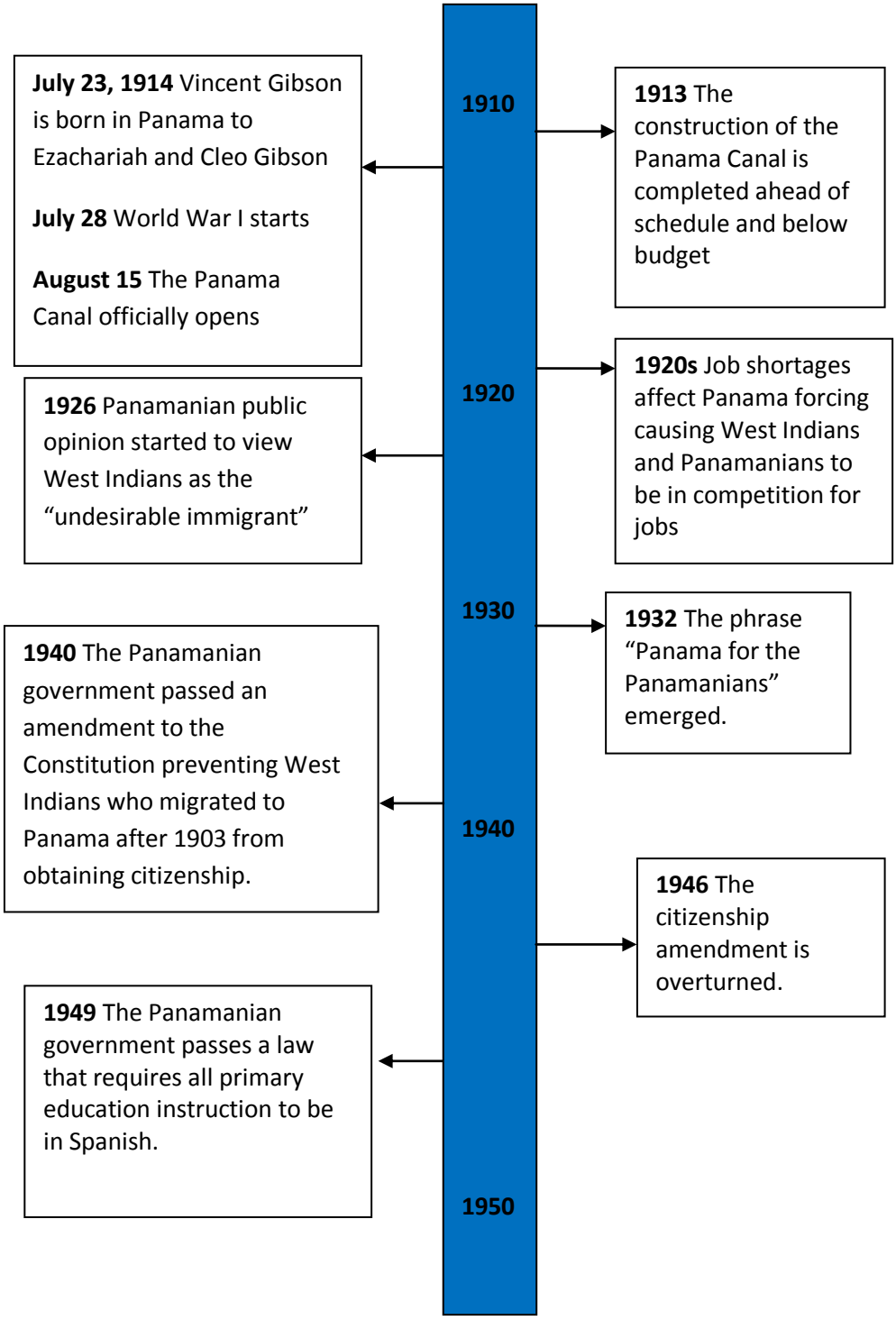
1833 British Slavery Abolition Act of 1833
1834-1838 Apprenticeship for former slaves in British Caribbean
1850-1855 Panama Railroad Construction
Oct. 11, 1865 Morant Bay Rebellion
1881 Construction starts on French Canal
1889 French Canal Company declares
1898 Spanish American War
Nov. 3, 1903 Panama becomes independent.
Nov. 13 USA formally recognizes the Republic of Panama
Nov 18. Hay–Bunau-Varilla Treaty signed establishing US-Canal Zone
March 3, 1904 The Isthmian Canal Commission was started by President Roosevelt to oversee the construction of the Panama Canal
May 4, US takes control of former French Canal property


1910
1920
1930
1940
1950
July 23, 1914 Vincent Gibson is born in Panama to Ezachariah and Cleo Gibson
July 28 World War I starts
August 15 The Panama Canal officially opens
1913 The construction of the Panama Canal is completed ahead of schedule and below budget
1926 Panamanian public opinion started to view West Indians as the "undesirable immigrant"
1920s Job shortages affect Panama forcing causing West Indians and Panamanians to be in competition for jobs
1940 The Panamanian government passed an amendment to the Constitution preventing West Indians who migrated to Panama after 1903 from obtaining citizenship.
1932 The phrase "Panama for the Panamanians" emerged.
1946 The citizenship amendment is overturned.
1949 The Panamanian government passes a law that requires all primary education instruction to be in Spanish.

Preface

The inspiration for this work came about the during my sophomore year in my Historical Research Methods class when I stumbled upon the letters by Methodist minister Thomas Neely who wrote from Panama during the early years of the American period of Panama Canal construction. My father told me that my grandfather was born in Panama while his father, my great-grandfather, worked on the Canal. Finding this source raised many questions at a crucial point in my development as an academic. I became immediately interested in learning about this then nameless mythical family figure. I wanted to reconstruct his life and understand why he decided to migrate to Panama. As the project developed, my larger goal was to discover his name and give my family closure as to who he was and why he is important. When I found Ezachariah Gibson's name written in the Isthmian Canal Commission's *Birth Records* as the father for my grandfather, I knew that I had accomplished something very important, not only for my family, but also for the larger narrative on West Indian men, such as Ezachariah, that sought to redefine themselves in the changing world. Although I have not been able to find all of the particular details about his life, finding his name connects my personal family history to the larger global history that surrounds the Panama Canal. My great-grandfather was a black Hercules whose labor helped reshape the globe. This work brings his story and the story of the other forgotten West Indian laborers to the forefront of the Panama Canal discourse.

Acknowledgements

This project is the culmination of the support and guidance of many people. I would like to thank Elizabeth Patterson for her countless hours in helping me research and locate my primary and secondary sources for this work. I would also like to thank Barrye Brown, Shauna Collier, Rhonda Frederick of Boston College, and Shani Roper from the Institute of Jamaica for their assistance in helping me hone in on some specific sources for my thesis that helped to frame my argument. Thanks to the Moore Undergraduate Research and Apprentice Program and UNC-Chapel Hill for giving me the opportunity to explore such an understudied area of world history. With the financial support of the Leavell-Oberg Fellowship I was able to find unique sources that are central to this project at the National Archives in College Park, MD. I thank Drew's Professor Emeritus of History, Perry Leavell, and his spouse, Professor Barbara Oberg of Princeton for their generous gift that created this fellowship.

I am very grateful for the guidance and advice of my thesis committee in the person of Wyatt Evans, Maliha Safri, and Catherine Keyser for reading my multiple drafts and helping me refine and frame my thesis. Thanks to Kennetta Perry of East Carolina University for serving as a mentor and challenging me to tackle the difficult questions on how the roles Afro-diasporic migration and imperialism played in the Atlantic world. Very special thanks to my thesis adviser and mentor Lillie Edwards for constantly challenging me to improve my research questions and arguments. Your critical questions have truly helped me grow significantly during the last two years while I have been working on the various components of my thesis. Moreover, your guidance over the

past four years has enabled me to become an intellectual who seeks to bring to light the stories of the marginalized.

Thanks to the Educational Opportunity Scholars Program and staff, Twannah Ellington, Joelle Falaise, Jodi Hawskwell, and Cordelza Haynes, for your constant support and for encouraging me to pursue every opportunity that was presented to me. The process of the oral history surrounding my mysterious great-grandfather would not have been possible without the help of my family Evadne Gibson, Donna Gibson, Beverly Gibson and Courtney Gibson. The bits and pieces each of you provided during our conversations have helped me to reconstruct the life and profile of an important figure in our family history. Finally, I would like thank my parents Leroy and Donna Gibson for encouraging me to always think critically and independently in all I pursue.

Abstract

By the 1850s, less than twenty years after the abolition of slavery in the British West Indies, black West Indians began to exercise their newfound freedom by choosing to migrate to the Isthmus of Panama to start new lives and search for economic opportunities. Low wages, the lack of job opportunities and land ownership, and disenfranchisement inspired West Indians to seek other labor opportunities outside of the confines of their islands starting in 1881 with the French attempt of constructing the Panama Canal. When the French failed, the relatively young United States stepped in to finish the project. Although global politics are important, this project highlights the agency of the West Indian laborers that saw Panama as a land of economic opportunity despite the marginalization, racism, and exploitation they faced. The fortitude of the West Indians has not been studied yet it provides great insight into the men that made the construction of the Panama Canal possible. This work charts the West Indian immigrant's experience in Panama to validate the importance of understanding a marginalized population in the larger stories of empire and the global economy. The departure from the tradition political history that surrounds the Panama Canal changes the conversation to focus more on the individual agency that West Indians exhibited throughout their time in Panama and how this agency allowed for the creation of a unique communal enclave and identity in Panama. Furthermore, it illuminates the important details concerning what happens to the West Indian community once the Canal is completed in 1914. Taking a transnational approach, this project explores how West Indian ambition allowed West Indians to reimagine their freedom and economic

opportunity in the changing political and imperial dynamics of the Caribbean and Latin America.

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Chapter I.

Introduction

In 1904, sixty-six years after the abolition of slavery in the British West Indies, black West Indians migrated to Panama to work on the American construction of the Panama Canal. Over the next ten years, approximately 75,000 men worked on the Canal with an estimated 12,000 succumbing to diseases such as malaria and pneumonia or construction and railroad accidents. One of these men was Ezachariah Gibson, my great-grandfather. Not much is known about Ezachariah. His story of why he migrated to work on a dangerous project after the failure of the French Canal attempt was lost after his death and until recently his name was lost as well. Nonetheless, the sources available concerning West Indian[1] migration to the region can help me discover why my great-grandfather set out to work on the Panama Canal. Analyzing the factors that influenced West Indians to seek out economic and social opportunity away from the confines of their colonial homes has personal and historical significance.

This work examines the role the Panama Canal played as a manifestation of freedom and economic opportunity for the black English speaking immigrants in the midst of imperial exploitation and racial discrimination. My research shows that West Indians saw the danger and uncertainty within the Canal's economic and structural inequalities, yet they valued the possible outcomes of financial stability that were not

[1] This work will use black West Indian and West Indian interchangeably. Both refer to African descendant people from the British West Indies mainly Jamaicans and Barbadians but also West Indians from Trinidad and Tobago and other islands in the Lesser Antilles.

readily available to them on their island homes. This agency is the central piece to my work as it can be traced from the first major migration during 1881 up through the formation of a particularly West Indian enclave in cities like Colón, Panama by 1970. Despite the challenges posed by western imperialisms, the opportunity to earn money outside of plantation labor proved to be a major motivator during the various manifestations of West Indian racial and imperial exploitation. Recruiters during the French and American construction periods valued these immigrants for their strong work ethic. By being marginalized and exploited by various imperial powers, West Indians showed their resilience as immigrants in their attempt to advance their social standing in spite of the obstacles. As a result West Indian communities became fortified in Panama and West Indians developed a non-assimilationist attitude that would lead to further difficulties with the Panamanian nationals following the completion of the Canal in 1914.

My research seeks to analyze how West Indians defined themselves after they migrated to Panama. As West Indians participated in both the French and American periods of construction, the same factors that pushed them to migrate defined their community in Panama. Being black English-speaking immigrants who sought to better their economic opportunity enabled West Indians to create communal structures that allowed the West Indians to define themselves not solely as unskilled laborers, but rather as British subjects seeking employment away from the control of the plantocracy of their home islands. West Indians participated in an increasingly globalized world and demonstrated how an immigrant population influenced how empire, race, and labor were defined during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This self-reliance serves

as a key marker for how West Indian immigrants would continue to define their own cultural identity instead of being given one by a colonial power or later the Panamanian government. Finally, I seek to understand what the experiences of West Indian immigrants in Panama reveal about how marginalized populations negotiate and define their identity despite exploitation and discrimination. West Indians played a crucial role in not only defining Panama, but also reimagining the larger world since the Panama Canal altered global trade and economy. Furthermore, this change was not created intentionally with West Indians seeking to be recognized for their work on the Canal, but instead West Indians wanted to fulfill their personal goals of a better life for themselves and their families. The migration to Panama represents how the personal becomes politicized for an oppressed population; forming a collective identity becomes an act of political agency and independence.

Black West Indians present an interesting case to examine when studying the history of the Panama Canal since the development of Panama is inextricably tied to West Indian involvement in the country starting with the France's attempt to construct the Canal from1881 to 1889. During this period Jamaica faced severe internal turmoil following the Morant Bay Rebellion in 1865. Nonetheless, the West Indian experience in Panama shifted slightly under the American period of construction with the introduction of racial segregation by the Isthmian Canal Commission (ICC). The segregationist policies enacted by the ICC came to define how West Indians were perceived racially which greatly impacted their position in Panamanian society following the completion of the Canal in 1914. However, West Indians achieved mild upward economic mobility

since American employers in Panama preferred these English-speaking West Indians in this Spanish-speaking country. Panamanians resented the success of the West Indians and struggled to maintain control of Panama's economics, politics, and culture by suppressing West Indian political power with the removal of Panamanian citizenship from children born to West Indian parents in Panama after 1903.

To fully analyze the lives of West Indian immigrants and their agency, we must first define who migrated to Panama. According to Velma Newton, the men that went to work on the canal included skilled laborers such as artisans and office workers but she also says, "Tailors, shoemakers, carpenters, clerks" went to the Isthmus.[2] These men were important yet we must not assume that this was the typical migrant laborer. Newton says that the average man that migrated to the Canal worked was, "an agricultural labourer[*sic*] or unskilled town dweller, between twenty and thirty-five years old, and was illiterate, or had gone to elementary school for only a few years."[3] For most of these men their goal was to simply earn enough money in Panama to return home, buy a small plot[4] of land, build a house for their families, and live a simple life.[5] However, Julie Greene's work complicates the socio-economic identity of the West Indian immigrants to the Canal. Her sources reveal that ICC officials found West Indians, especially

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[2] Velma Newton, *The Silver Men: West Indian Labour Migration to Panama, 1850-1914* (Mona, Kingston 7, Jamaica: Institute of Social and Economic Research, 1984), 102-103.

[3] Ibid., 103.

[4] In the Caribbean at this time land was a crucial part of citizenship as mainly landowners were able to vote in the places where Crown Colony rule did not exist. Furthermore, land was the pinnacle of freedom for former slaves as it gave them the opportunity to provide for themselves and support their families.

[5] Newton, 102-103.

Jamaicans, to have good mastery of English,[6] however, speaking ability does not equate to literacy. Furthermore, the underlying question is where did these Jamaican men, such as Ezachariah, get the money to pay the departure tax. In addition, the British colonial government required that Jamaican immigrants pay a departure tax. If the majority of immigrants were literate and had the money to pay the departure tax, did they have sufficient incentive to migrate? If the majority were illiterate, unskilled workers and plantation laborers, where did they get the money to pay the departure tax? Although additional research would provide more definitive answers, for the purposes of this study I conclude the following: (1) British colonial rule stymied social and economic mobility for all West Indians, both those whose entrepreneurship, literacy and landownership allowed them to escape the sugar cane fields and those who still labored in the hot sun, machetes in hand. Thus both groups had incentives to leave. (2) What the ICC offered as pull factors exceeded the opportunity structures of British colonial Jamaica. (3) Further research will probably reveal, as this study shows, that impoverished people can be and often have to be creatively resourceful If migration offered sufficiently compelling push and pull factors, prospective migrants could have borrowed money, or pooled extended family and community resources to pay the departure tax.

The immigrant profiles in this study illuminate why Panama was so lucrative and attractive to these men who sought to define their freedom and leave the economic stagnancy that existed on their colonial islands during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. More personally, this story of who migrated to Panama Canal allows

[6] Julie Greene, *Canal Builders: Making America's Empire at the Panama Canal* (London: Penguin Books, 2009), 145.

me to reconstruct the identity of my great-grandfather and understand why he decided to migrate. Migrating from his home in rural Epsom, St. Mary, Jamaica, Ezachariah fit the typical profile of a small time farmer or plantation worker who was either illiterate or semi-literate and saw the Panama Canal as a critical and singular opportunity for his family. However, familial oral history says that Ezachariah worked as a conductor which expands the possibilities to include the option of Ezachariah being a skilled laborer. Many West Indians like my great-grandfather knew of the arduous labor and high mortality that the constructions of the Panama Railroad and the failed French Canal required. Nonetheless, these men demonstrated their agency by migrating to Panama despite the known risks. These men left their closed communities not to participate in a global project for the benefit of the imperial powers put for personal reasons of being able to receive a stable job and better pay than was available as plantation workers or as skilled laborers.[7]

Workers were also well-aware that American racial constructions awaited them. An article published in the *Jamaica Daily Gleaner* on March 21, 1898 that first appeared in the *New York Herald* shows that Jamaicans knew of the racism and racial tension that existed in the United States. The article describes a recent a lynching in Lake City, South Carolina that sparked a demonstration from African Americans in the area. The article treats the blacks unfairly as it criticizes them for being "illiterate and irresponsible" and talks of the backlash as starting a "race war" thus justifying the actions of the lynch mob.[8] This attitude was applied to all people of African descent. Despite this understanding of

[7] Newton, 103.
[8] "A Reign of Terror," *Daily Gleaner* March 21, 1898.

American racism both in practice and structural racism as revealed through the media, West Indians chose to migrate to Panama in order for the American Canal to provide them and later their families with better opportunities.

The United States saw the Canal as a major geo-political and economic opportunity. By connecting the two largest oceans in 1914, the United States ascended to the throne as the reigning superpower, easily surpassed the French who previously failed in their attempt to build the Canal. In doing so, the United States became Great Britain's main competitor in the 20th century as a rising empire in the Western Hemisphere. The idea of a canal across the Isthmus of Panama had existed since Spain's New World exploration in the 1500s. A passageway through the narrow 48 miles of land promised a lucrative business to whomever controlled the Canal as shipping companies wanted to avoid a continental trip around South America just to deliver goods. With the French failure in their construction efforts and the increasing political tensions between a small group of revolutionaries in the Province of Panama against the government of Columbia, the United States' intervention in the region transformed the dream of a canal into a reality. In 1903, President Theodore Roosevelt made a deal with the revolutionaries to support their quest for freedom from Columbia in exchange for the 553 square miles that became the Canal Zone. Determined to see the completion of the Canal, Roosevelt sent warships to Columbia to intimidate the country into granting Panama its freedom. By November 3, 1903 Panama declared its independence and was recognized by the United States on the 13th. Within six months the American canal construction began. The Canal became both a technological marvel admired throughout recent history as well as the

perfect political and cultural experiment that united various people from around the world in the shared goal of contributing to something greater than themselves. The West Indians' contribution to this global project is often viewed solely in terms of their work as unskilled laborers and this simplistic approach made the West Indian voice and motivations invisible. This thesis reveals their voice, their motivations and the seminal role in shifting global power in the early 20th century. This work is not about globalization, but instead it is a story about how people see personal opportunity in the midst of global political changes.

Historians have not explored the importance of how the history of Jamaican labor migration intersects with this history of competing western imperialisms in the Americas during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. However, the history of the Panama Canal which is also a story about modern empire building, first by the French and later by the Americans, relies heavily on the West Indian workers who migrated to Panama to escape the economic deterioration of their home islands. Jamaica supplied the majority of the black labor during the French canal project, therefore this research allows for the analysis of how Jamaica transitioned from one of Great Britain's largest and former wealthiest sugar slave societies to a colony populated by a majority black labor force struggling to secure a fair system of economic opportunity equality in this period of globalization. I explore the nascent formation of the West Indian identity in Panama with the migration of Jamaicans to work on the French Canal starting in 1881. This identity continued to develop in subsequent generations with new waves of West Indian migrants.

Although the western imperialisms of Great Britain, France, and the United States required white supremacist ideology to function via the exploitation and subjugation of black bodies, black West Indians defied this system of oppression by using migration. With their agency, West Indians workers sent a powerful message to the imperial power affirming their humanity. My holistic approach to this analysis illuminates the nexus between the various transnational and global shifts and the migration of West Indians to Panama between 1881 and 1914. Unlike previous scholarship, this work realizes that in order to understand the larger conversations of race and empire, the intersecting events of migration and the involvement of western empires in Panama needs to be examined in a single frame instead of as independent variables. In the process, West Indians demonstrated how the true power and survival of an empire rested on them. The current scholarship does not take into account how West Indians tried to reconfigure their position in the global economy amidst the competition between dominant Western imperialisms in the Americas. This approach creates broader discussion of how migration should not be studied solely through the lens of economic opportunity alone, but also from an Afro-Diasporic perspective, which explores the ways in which migration has historically represented a path towards freedom.

The primary and secondary sources I used for this work allowed me to construct the West Indian narrative around three essential time periods in the Panama Canal experience. The first is the French period which lasts from 1881 to 1904 and covers how the French laid a foundation which the Americans would continue to develop. I use Jamaica as a case study during the French period because of the major push factors that

occurred on the island that encouraged Jamaicans to migrate to Panama. Jamaican labor migration models why West Indians in a broader sense migrated to Panama starting in 1904. For example, an estimated 9,000 men out of the 12,875 laborers brought to work on the French Canal in 1885 were Jamaican. The dominance of Jamaican labor in this period requires and justifies the examination of their first migration in the 1880s and leads to the next Jamaican wave in the 1900s. Jamaican labor migration is needed to understand the larger migration that occurs with the start of the American period in 1904.[9] The American period serves as the major focus of this work as the United States became a serious global power after the Canal was built with of the West Indian labor. The primary sources reveal the major incentives for both the American desire to construct the Panama Canal as well as the benefits for West Indians to immigrate to work on the project. Lastly, the third part of this thesis examines what happens to the West Indian community after the Canal is finished and their relationship with Panamanians who grew to resent the success and social mobility that the West Indians enjoyed. This section highlights how West Indian agency evolved over almost three generations and as a result helped to produce a unique cultural community within Panama despite the marginalization and discrimination West Indians faced under the French, American and Panamanian governance and social structure.

The sources I used for my research help to dissect the various factors that influenced West Indian life in Panama. Sources such as colonial reports, newspapers in

[9] George W. Westerman, "Historical Notes on West Indians on the Isthmus of Panama," *Phylon* 4 (1961): 340.

Panama and Jamaica and death statistics reveal how the imperial shifts that occurred in the Caribbean between 1881 and1904 affected the decision for black Jamaicans to emigrate. Many colonial documents such as the Emigrant Protection Law of 1902, various annual Colonial Reports, and the *Report of the West India Royal Commission 1897* from Great Britain and Jamaica clarify the conditions that served as push factors that sparked the Jamaican migration during the 19th century and which eventually opened up to include other West Indians in the 20th century. The documents published by the French Canal Company illustrate the pull factors that attracted Jamaicans to work on the Isthmus of Panama. In addition, newspapers in Jamaica and Panama provide insight into the initial stages of migration during the French period. They include the varying perceptions of black Jamaican workers from Panamanian supporters of the Canal construction and the Jamaican plantocracy that wanted black Jamaicans to remain as wage laborers. These newspapers also clarify what happened after the French failed in their attempt to build the Canal and the global desire to have another imperial power to take up the construction of the Canal. Furthermore, I use statistics to illustrate the inhumane conditions that the West Indians lived under during the French and American periods. Nonetheless, the longer trajectory of the West Indian experience in Panama demonstrates how, as an immigrant population, West Indians refused to accept the racist notions and identities constructed for them as black unskilled laborers by the imperial powers. These laborers saw their work on the Canal and the accompanying discrimination, disease even death as necessary evils in order to eventually exercise their freedom and economic mobility. Lastly, I use official Panama Canal Company

documents found at the National Archives in College Park, Maryland that were turned over to the Americans after the French failed to complete the Canal.

I delve deeper into the perceptions of the West Indian community by using outside non-governmental reports such as *Things as They are in Panama* by Harry Franck and the journal article "The Panama Canal in 1908" by Vaughn Cornish which were used to generate support for the American Canal effort.[10] Also, the American period was well documented by the ICC not only in terms of a paper trail of official documents, but also in an extensive collection of photographs which provide visual evidence of the conditions that West Indians had to endure during this period. These images of the West Indians arriving in Panama and their living conditions are crucial to understanding the West Indians' immigrant story. Using the photographs and statistics, I compare black and white workers' wages, housing, skilled and unskilled work assignments, health and death rates to assess racial inequalities and ICC white supremacist ideologies that created sustained inhumane racist policies. Although these policies mirror those in many areas of American and European colonialism and the conditions for the impoverished laborers in American factories and on farms, the West Indian history in Panama helps us understand how immigrants understood and defined their own lives. It also reveals the transformation from human oppression and subordination to social and economic mobility. Their housing was uninhabitable, they faced a segregationist ICC, and they died in large numbers from disease and construction accidents, yet West Indians not only maintained their initial hopes of achieving the goals that had led them to Panama, but

[10] Harry A. Franck, *Things as they are in Panama* (London: The Century Company, 1913), 59. and Vaughan Cornish, "The Panama Canal in 1908," *The Geographical Journal* 2 (1909): 177.

they also actively worked to make their dreams a reality. They expressed agency in defining their own lives in spite of racism and discrimination.

Final I unpack how the story of immigrants does not end with their motivations to migrate. The story continues with the West Indian struggle between assimilation and cultural retention. Scholarly works published during the time period, such as those by sociologist John Biesanz who studied the West Indian community's formation in Panama following the construction of the Panama Canal, examine how the West Indians were received by the Panamanians. Biesanz's articles function as strong primary sources that illustrate the resentment that Panamanians felt toward the West Indians since West Indians were still being employed in large numbers by international corporations because they spoke English. Also, Biesanz's articles illustrate how Panamanians viewed West Indian culture as a threat to their Spanish heritage and therefore European heritage. Their demand that West Indians assimilate, especially that West Indians speak Spanish, symbolized that Panamanians wanted to eliminate the West Indian immigrant identity altogether. Furthermore, I use actual personal accounts, collected by Ifeoma C.K Nwanko and Lucius T. Outlaw, Jr., of the West Indian descendants whose parents worked on the Canal but were born in Panama. These voices account for how the West Indian community responded to the continued persecution that they faced from the Panamanian government. These particularly unique sources also allow me to reveal how West Indian agency evolved throughout the community's formation in Panama from the initial Jamaican migration in 1881 to the emergence of the West Indian influence subculture . Popular culture of the 1970s, I claim, continues to show the legacy of this subculture.

For the secondary sources that help me define my project, Elizabeth McLean Petras's book, *Jamaican Labor Migration: White Capital and Black Labor, 1850-1930* pays special attention to how Jamaica struggled to adopt a fair economic system after the complete abolition of slavery in 1838 that would provide all Jamaicans with various options for economic survival.[11] She examines how rising economic and political disenfranchisement contributed to Jamaicans developing a migration culture by the 1850s with the construction of the Panama Railroad. Therefore, when the French began recruiting canal workers in the 1880s, more Jamaicans already saw Panama as the place for economic opportunity and utilized their freedom to expand their economic options beyond plantation wage labor. However, Petras does say that the imperial conquests of both France and United States need to be examined in conjunction with Jamaican labor migration which expressed the power that a migrant population had even in an age of increase imperial influence in Panama.[12] My scholarship fills this gap. Also, her analysis does not delve deeply into the creation of a West Indian agency that continued to grow and evolve with the American period of construction.

I use Velma Newton's work in *The Silver Men: West Indian Labour Migration to Panama, 1850-1914*[13] for my analysis of the creation of the West Indian immigrant community in Panama. This book closely examines how the migration of West Indians to Panama before the American construction is important to Caribbean and Latin American

[11] Elizabeth Petras, *Jamaican Labor Migration: White Capital and Black Labor, 1850-1930* (Boulder, Co: Westview Press, 1988).

[12] Ibid., 106.

[13] Newton.

history. Newton uses earlier migrations of West Indians to Panama starting in 1850 to argue that West Indians were integral in defining not only Panama and the United States but also the larger world history by focusing on how West Indians saw Panama as the place of economic opportunity. Newton argues that the French failure gave the United States the chance to adapt to the unforgiving nature of Panama in order to successfully complete the canal. Nonetheless, Newton fails to explore how West Indians used their migration to redefine their economic position in the changing dynamics of the Western hemisphere as the world powers struggled to control Panama by constructing an inter-oceanic canal. Newton alludes to the idea that the Americans used the labor system that the French established for the canal by employing black West Indians from islands with struggling economies and by improving upon the construction process used by the French, but she does not clarify how the migration of West Indians reflected the changing environment of the time. Furthermore, she compares how the American and French periods differed from one another and how both of them affected the West Indian population. Nevertheless, her work lacks the concrete evidence that I obtained from the Isthmian Canal Commission's reports to show how American racism was manifested in a racially discriminatory pay scale on the Isthmus.

Julie Greene's book, *Canal Builders: Making America's Empire at the Panama Canal*, provides a very complete analysis of the Panama construction and all of its social, economic, and political features. Her analysis is influenced by the older political history methods of telling the story of the Panama Canal construction as a project that established the United States as a world power. Moreover, Greene constructs her argument around

the idea that the Panama Canal is not solely an American triumph over nature, but the completion is the result of the efforts of many groups of people from around the world. Greene dedicates an entire chapter to the understanding of the West Indian workers and their lives in Panama during the construction. In this chapter, Greene deconstructs how the American policies and governing of the ICC affected the lives of their West Indian employees. She analyzes several personal accounts, statistics, and governmental documents to draw the conclusion that American racism was inextricably tied to the lives of these West Indian workers during the construction years. Greene's research not only shows that the West Indian workers had a difficult life under the American system, but also that they found ways to resist the inequalities that existed such as attempting to fight for their rights in injury lawsuits against the ICC.[14] Greene successfully creates an analysis that dissects the importance American racism played during the American Canal construction. My work takes this concept further by highlighting how West Indian agency was always present in the West Indian experience in Panama, both during and after the construction period. Furthermore, I examine how the American period served as a catalyst that exacerbated the racial attitudes that had existed in Panama since it was a Spanish colony.

Michael Conniff's book, *Black Labor on a White Canal: Panama, 1904-1981*, highlights specifically the American involvement in Panama starting in 1904. [15] Conniff

[14] Greene, 123-158.

[15] Michael Conniff, *Black Labor on a White Canal: Panama, 1904-1981*(Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh, 1985) and Trevor O'Reggio, *Between Alienation and Citizenship: The Evolution of Black West Indian Society in Panama, 1914-1964* (Lanham, MD, University Press of America, 2006).

uses several statistics that help to illustrate an image of an unequal system that disenfranchised the black workers and kept them in a subjugated position in the Canal Zone. Conniff argues extensively about these inequalities and is the most commonly used piece of literature in other studies about the role of West Indians on the Panama Canal. His work provides a better explanation of how American racism affected the West Indian community than Newton's work, but it does not provide detail about how American racism affected West Indians aside from salaries and living arrangements.

Although the study of the construction project and how it affected the West Indian community only emerged within the last twenty years, my secondary sources show the diversity that exists in the understanding of the Panama Canal construction project and its influence on the West Indian workforce. Velma Newton's book, *The Silver Men: West Indian Labour Migration to Panama, 1850-1914,* focuses more on the migration of West Indians to the Isthmus of Panama to form a strong community, but does not go far enough to claim that American racism influenced the societal position that West Indians held in Panama.[16] Michael Conniff is known for being one of the first scholars to write about the West Indian experience in Panama with his book, *Black Labor on a White Canal: Panama, 1904-1981,* and he does make connections between American racism and the lives of the West Indians, but his work lacks a more comprehensive view of the repercussions of the Canal construction on West Indians and Panamanians.[17] Julie Greene, on the other hand, provides a more concrete analysis concerning this topic, but

[16] Newton.

[17] Michael Conniff, *Black Labor on a White Canal: Panama, 1904-1981*(Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh, 1985).

her work cannot be fully understood without Newton and Conniff's books that provide more details concerning the lives of these West Indian workers. These details help to illuminate the West Indian agency that was present throughout both construction periods and how it began to develop and to survive after 1914.

Finally, in the book *Between Alienation and Citizenship: The Evolution of Black West Indian Society in Panama, 1914-1964*, Trevor O'Reggio examines how economic competition from the West Indians caused the Panamanian government to politically disenfranchise the West Indians from having a significant political claim in Panama after contributing to the structural development of the country with the construction of the Canal. [18] Little scholarship exists that examines the West Indian narrative in Panama after the Canal finished so this source provides limited insight into how the West Indian continued to be seen as migrant laborers. O'Reggio describes how the West Indians who originally came to Panama as migrants decided to stay and fortify their presence on the Isthmus of Panama despite being depicted as aliens by the Panamanians. My research expands on O'Reggio's because I focus on how these economic and political factors played a role in defining West Indian cultural expression in Panama and how it transformed and became integrated into the larger Panamanian cultural heritage. I look at the significance of how West Indians managed to carve out their own protected enclave although they were despised and persecuted by Panamanians.

Within the last twenty years, historians have begun to study the large West Indian populations on the Isthmus of Panama and their contributions to both Panamanian as well

[18] Trevor O'Reggio, *Between Alienation and Citizenship: The Evolution of Black West Indian Society in Panama, 1914-1964* (Lanham, MD: University of America, 2006).

as American history throughout the 20th century. The majority of the recent scholarship concerning West Indians in Panama focuses on the ten year period of the American construction between the years of 1904 -1914. Scholars such as Michael Conniff, in his book *Black Labor on a White Canal,* analyze how racist American labor policies negatively affected West Indians and forced them into an inferior category via a form of segregation. His book and books by other scholars such as Trevor O'Reggio and Lancelot Lewis represent a departure from the traditional narrative of the Panama Canal construction that glorifies the leaders and innovators such as Theodore Roosevelt and George Goethals. These authors instead focus on highlighting the unsung heroes of this great American project and their struggles to gain recognition in a major event in world history. Although these historical analyses of the American construction and how it affected West Indians are necessary, the scholarship on the West Indian involvement with the Panama Canal needs to study the larger trajectory of the development of the West Indian community in Panama starting with the French Canal construction and continuing past 1914 to answer the question, "What happens to the West Indians when they decided to stay in Panama?"

All of the scholars used for this study have ignored the powerful role of being an immigrant and instead focused solely on the racial discrimination that West Indians faced under the French and American construction periods. My study links labor, race, and empire to reveal a more complex narrative of the West Indian in Panama. Using these three lenses I am able to create a control for the three different time periods that span nearly three generations to analyze how an immigrant community defines itself in the

face of oppressive and discriminatory conditions. The marginalization of the West Indian community manifested differently in all three periods making it essential to understand how the West Indian community defined race, empire, and labor in the international sphere during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Their position as exploited black laborers from British colonies serves as a key pillar to understanding how a marginalized group can reinterpret world events in an effort to create change. The ambition and agency of these workers allowed for not only a global change, but also precipitated a societal change as West Indians that stayed in Panama managed to achieve the dream of the Colón man: being able to gain social mobility and financial stability.

In the 100 years since the Canal was finished by the United States, the descendants of the West Indian immigrants that moved to Panama during the late 19th and early 20 centuries had become incorporated into the larger Panamanian identity. However, adopting the Panamanian identity did not equate to assimilating completely to the country's idealized model immigrant. Taking a holistic approach allows me to examine the emergence of an immigrant community starting from the push and pull factors that led to migration and finishing with how the descendants of that population managed to retain their cultural heritage in the new country which they claim as their home.

The sacrifices of the West Indian community in Panama have not been fully recognized in the current historiography. I shed light on the invisible hands that not only enabled America to become an empire in the 20th century, but also how the West Indian involvement in the Panama Canal construction reflected the converging themes of

globalization and Afro-diasporic migration. Though the French and later the United States saw the West Indians as an exploitable resource due to their conditions of living in the British West Indies, West Indians viewed the migration to Panama as an opportunity to redefine their position in the world by removing their labor from a declining agrarian economy under colonialism to the ruthless economic ambitions of industrialize America. While the West Indians did not know what fate awaited them in Panama, they took the risk of migrating to this dangerous frontier, not seeking to make history, but determined to provide better opportunities for themselves and their families. It is with this fortitude that they changed the landscape of the world and enabled the United States to begin to emerge as a leading global empire in the twentieth century. In doing so, they transformed their own lives and that of their descendants, including my family and me.

Chapter II.

The Point of Empire:

The Intersection of Jamaican Labor Migration and Western Imperialisms in Panama, 1881-1904

An advertisement posted by the Panama Canal Company appeared in the August 6, 1885, issue of *The Daily Gleaner* explaining that its ship, the *Amicitia*, would leave on the following day sailing towards the Caribbean port city of Colón in Panama. The announcement boasted that the new steamship was designed for "the comfort and convenience of third class passengers" and it described how there would be an unrestricted supply of food and water. [19] This romantic image of traveling to Panama permeated the advertisements distributed by the French Panama Canal Company in a number of West Indian newspapers including the *Daily Gleaner* from Jamaica during the early 1880s in order to recruit potential migrant workers to work on the canal project.

During the French construction which lasted from 1881 to 1888, West Indians constituted 90% of the workforce on the Panama Canal Company's project. By 1885, the French Canal Company's dream of constructing the Panama Canal had started to fade. Despite employing famed builder of the Suez Canal, Ferdinand De Lesseps, and having the support of the French people, the company underestimated the environment and landscape of Panama. Moreover, in 1885 the French company lost 15,215 of its workers

[19] "Will Sail for Colon," *Daily Gleaner*, August 6, 1885.

to diseases such as malaria and yellow fever and from construction accidents.[20] As a result the cost of the Panama Canal construction became a serious financial burden that taxed the finances of the French Canal Company until it declared bankruptcy in 1889.

This chapter will analyze how the economic deterioration of the British West Indies and the disenfranchisement of black Jamaicans contributed to their migration to Panama to work on the French Canal in 1881. The use of racial subjugation by the plantocracy and colonial government in Jamaica served as a push factor for black Jamaicans to begin taking their labor to the French Canal. The construction of the Panama Canal both under the French, and later the United States, was an act of imperialism and a move towards empire-building. The canal not only held economic benefits for global trade, but it also functioned as a strategically political move. Whoever controlled the canal would have a significantly stronger presence in the region. The nation that controlled the Canal would also benefit by regulating the international shipping and trading industry with companies seeking to reduce travel times and costs by traveling through Panama instead of around South America. The British also participated in this imperial contest in a different way. By the 19th century and the building of the Canal, Britain was the only surviving European power in the Americas. Its presence and power resided, in part, within its colonies. However, despite the Euro-American geo-political influences during this time period, Jamaican agency is the center of this chapter as the conversation's focus shifts from a discussion about imperial powers to an analysis of Jamaican ambition.

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[20] Velma Newton, *The Silver Men: West Indian Labour Migration to Panama, 1850-1914*, (Kingston Jamaica: Ian Randle Publishers, 2004), 118.

Post Emancipation Jamaica and the Push for Migration

In 1833, the British Parliament passed the Abolition of Slavery Act which ordered the British colonies to abolish slavery in 1834. A stipulation in this law was the required four year apprenticeship period where former slaves were required to continue work on their former plantations. Also, slave owners were compensated for their loss of property. After the end of apprenticeship in Jamaica on August 1, 1838, the once flourishing Jamaican sugar industry lost its preferred status which negatively affected the black Jamaican population. Many black Jamaicans worked for meager salaries doing the same backbreaking plantation labor they had performed as during slavery. The implementation of the Sugar Duties Act of 1846 removed the British West Indies' preferred status in taxing the importation of sugar by opting to import cheaper sugar from slave holding countries such as Brazil and Cuba instead of Great Britain's own colonies.[21] This coupled with the rise of beet sugar production in Europe removed the monopoly of West Indian sugar that had developed over four hundred years of slavery.[22] Jamaica tried to remain competitive in the global sugar market following the passage of the Sugar Duties Act in 1846, however, the price of exported Jamaican sugar to Great Britain dropped from 34 shillings in 1846 to 27 shillings by 1850 (See Graph 1).[23] This drop in prices influenced

[21] Velma Newton, *The Silver Men: West Indian Labour Migration to Panama, 1850-1914* (Kingston 7, Jamaica: Ian Randle, 2004), 7.

[22] Elizabeth Petras, *Jamaican Labor Migration: White Capital and Black Labor, 1850-1930* (Boulder, Co: Westview Press, 1988), 15-20.

[23] Newton, 8.

the dismal economic decline on the island which negatively and disproportionately affected the black former slave population.

By the 1880s Jamaica's former sugar-driven economy faced several challenges, including drought and a competitive sugar market. By 1884, Great Britain imported only 168 tons of cane sugar from all of its West Indian colonies in comparison to 414 tons from other regions that included Cuba, Brazil, and South East Asia and 559 tons in beet sugar. Furthermore, the British West Indies' export of cane sugar fluctuated throughout the 1880s dipping to its lowest levels in 1886 with 256 tons of exported sugar of which Great Britain only imported 99 tons (See Graph 2).[24] In this unstable environment, most black Jamaicans became further marginalized in a racialized class based society, forced to live as peasants depending on the will of the colonial government. Black Jamaicans used migration to escape these conditions in hope of creating a life where they could express their freedom. Working as unskilled laborers, they found that hope in the French canal construction project in Panama. This agency changed the dynamic in the Caribbean from a conversation about globalization precipitated by industrialized powers to a conversation about the central role that migrant labor played to make global industrial change a reality.

In the post emancipation years black Jamaicans struggled to adopt a fair economic and political system in spite of the plantocracy's suppression of the black majority's access to land and political power. The complete abolition of slavery in

[24] "British West Indian Sugar Exports and United Kingdom Sugar Imports, 1884-1900," original cited in *The Silver Men: West Indian Labour Migration, 1850-1914,* Ed. Velma Newton (Mona, Kingston 7, Jamaica: Institute of Social and Economic Research, 1984), 9.

Jamaica in 1838 granted former slaves the ability to vote but voting required them to pay a poll tax and to own land. If black Jamaicans did not meet both of these requirements, they were not allowed to vote. Since most Jamaicans received only paltry wages from their plantation jobs, the voting requirements left Jamaicans disenfranchised. Thus, the majority of political power remained concentrated among the white minority landowning population on the island. Despite being disenfranchised by the colonial government and planter class, former slaves felt that owning and cultivating their own land would allow them to express their independence, become self reliant, and garner wealth by selling goods. However, the plantocracy and colonial government made it difficult for black Jamaicans to purchase land by selling it above the current market price. In an effort to receive support for the Crown as British subjects, black Jamaicans sent thousands of petitions to Queen Victoria seeking her permission to farm on what were called "Crown lands" on the island. The most famous petition appeared in the *Jamaican Guardian* on March 21, 1865 as it initiated a direct response from the Crown which insisted, "The prosperity of the Labouring[*sic*] Class depends…upon their working for Wages…steadily and continuously, at times when their labour[*sic*] is wanted, and for so long as it is wanted."[25] The Queen's response affirmed that Jamaicans would continue to serve the colonial economy as plantation laborers and that legal freedom had not altered their low economic status. Her response set the standard for how blacks were defined in Jamaica; they were not intended to be anything more than wage laborers that supported the existing colonial structure. Thus, the British denied black Jamaicans their rights and

[25] Gad Heuman, *"The Killing Time": The Morant Bay Rebellion in Jamaica* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1994), 44.

privileges as British subjects and used them as an exploitable labor resource for the empire.

These tensions of citizenship and the desire for equality erupted in the Morant Bay Rebellion on October 11, 1865 when Revivalist Baptist minister Paul Bogle led a group of approximately 300 men and women to the Morant Bay courthouse in the parish of St. Thomas to protest the colonial government's unfair landownership policies. The event resulted in a volunteer militia being dispatched to end the protest and resulted in the militia killing seven black protestors. The enraged black protestors responded by killing 18 people including militia men. The rebels then seized control of Morant Bay and over the three day duration of the rebellion, black rebels roamed the countryside killing two additional white planters. Great Britain responded to the uprising by enforcing Crown Colony rule over Jamaica and stripping the black population of any political power and the right to petition. In this climate of economic deterioration, political disenfranchisement, and colonial mistreatment, black Jamaicans began to look for other opportunities to claim and express their freedom.[26] One of the responses to their circumstances came in the form of migration and the development of a migration culture in Jamaican society that continued throughout the remainder of the 19th century.

By the time of the Morant Bay Rebellion in 1865, fifteen years since the construction of the Panama Railroad began in 1850, a post emancipation migration culture had begun to thrive within the black Jamaican community. Recruiters for the Panama Railroad Company came to Jamaica looking for workers to help create the cross

[26] Thomas Holt, *The Problem of Freedom: Race, Labor, and Politics in Jamaica and Britain, 1832-1938* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 295-309.

isthmian railroad which would become crucial in the development of Panama and later in the construction of the Panama Canal. Due to the social class hierarchy in Jamaican society, which kept the white plantocracy at the top and the black populace at the bottom, the recruiting process for the railroad construction was simple for the American railroad company as black Jamaicans had limited labor options outside of plantation wage labor.[27] Americans turned to Jamaica after a failed attempt at using Chinese workers who experienced high death rates from tropical diseases. Although the sugar industry in Jamaica had not reached its lowest point, black Jamaicans used migration as a means of escaping the constraints of wage labor that colonialism had prescribed.[28] Elizabeth Petras correctly notes that the planters felt they could control the movement of the black population following the end of slavery and apprenticeship, but migration to countries, including Panama, in the 1850s marked a change in how the plantocracy and colonial government could operate in the latter half of the 19th century. They could no longer legally regulate the movement of black people as they had done during slavery.[29] The Panama Railroad provided a much needed option for economic freedom and allowed black Jamaicans to participate in a labor system outside of British colonial rule. Its

[27] Petras, 68.

[28] By 1865, Jamaican peasants began to experiment with fruit production in efforts to provide for their families. For this reason, the Morant Bay Rebellion holds special significance due to problem of black Jamaicans' lack of to land to farm. Also, fruit production was be industrialized with the arrival of the Boston Fruit Company (the name would later be changed to United Fruit Company) under the direction of Lorenzo Baker in 1886. Nonetheless, fruit production spread across the Caribbean basin during the latter half of the twentieth century with production occurring in places such as Honduras and Costa Rica. , Jamaica's fruit industry failed in comparison to its sugar industry during slavery since fruit production was controlled by an international corporation instead of the island's plantocracy. In addition, the plantations for the company were dispersed throughout the Caribbean region.

[29] Petras, 26.

construction marked the beginning of Jamaican agency as it framed Panama as a land of opportunity for the recently freed black Jamaicans. Panama became, in the Jamaican consciousness, a physical manifestation of the promise land, therefore, when the full force of colonialism further complicated the lives of the black population, Jamaicans already saw Panama as a possible destination.

Migration remained in the black Jamaicans' collective consciousness throughout the remainder of the 19th century as a way to secure economic stability and escape the yoke of colonial rule. The Panama Railroad construction marked the first wave of labor migration in post-emancipation Jamaica and contributed to the development of a powerful migration culture among the country's black proletariat. The disenfranchisement of the black majority in Jamaica along with the lack of jobs outside traditional plantation labor and a failing economy combined to form the major catalyst for Jamaican worker migration to work on Ferdinand De Lesseps French Canal starting in 1881. The beginning of the French Canal construction marked an important moment in the life of black Jamaicans as it initiated the pull factors that were necessary to encourage migration. Black Jamaicans faced constant discrimination prior to 1881, but these push factors could not operate without a corresponding powerful force that could entice immigration. It was the push factors of the deteriorating island conditions and political disenfranchisement and the pull factors of work on the Canal that evoked black Jamaicans' agency and desires to seek a better life working for the French as laborers in Panama.

The French Canal and the Colón Man

By attempting to build a canal in Panama, the French not only intended to capitalize on their success with the Suez Canal which finished construction in November 1869, but France also sought to reestablish its presence in the western hemisphere. At the beginning of the 19th century, France lost a large portion of its western holdings with the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, leaving its only remaining North American presence in Quebec. Furthermore, France suffered humiliation after the slaves from its prized sugar producing colony of San Domingue defeated the European power in 1804 to become independent. The new Republic of Haiti went against all notions of white supremacy and affirmed the humanity of black people. Although France still had the colonies of Martinique and Guadeloupe, both failed to offer the economic benefit and strategic military position that San Domingue had provided for the French empire. In addition, the dream of building a Cross Isthmian Canal existed since the exploration of the Americas in the 16th century. The French felt that they could complete this Canal and reestablish France's presence in the Americas.[30]

While the French sought to reaffirm their imperial power, the migration of Jamaicans to Panama that began in 1850s allowed for the emergence of the cultural image of the Colón man which represented the possibility of a better life in Panama. The Colón man was a West Indian man who left his impoverished island to work in Panama. Upon his return the man dressed in a fancy three-piece suit with an accompanying pocket watch. He became the symbol of hope to the struggling black Jamaicans who wanted

[30] Newton, 25.

recognition and respect as free men and British subjects. The 1992 song by Cedella Marley-Booker entitled "Colón man" describes the man as wearing a zoot suit,[31] eyeglasses, and having a brass chain for his pocket watch conveying the image of a black man who is able to look like a respectable gentleman after returning from his work in Panama.[32] Olive Senior highlights a character's use of "decorations from Panama" from Claude McKay's *Banana Bottom*, which include a gold watch, a tweed suit, and American styled lapels.[33] The Colón man serves as a key marker in Jamaican cultural memory as is evident with these descriptions of his attire and accessories. These depictions not only showed black Jamaicans that they could participate in the global job market and obtain success, but moreover they could change their economic status and dress like the white men that controlled the government and economy in Jamaica. The survival of this historical figure into the 1990s affirms the image of the Colón man as a pillar in Jamaican cultural memory. He served as the representation of the opportunities that migrating to Panama held during a time when black Jamaicans suffered from political and economic disenfranchisement. Lastly, the Colón man shifted the dialogue from the larger international politics at work to an expression of the individual Jamaican cultural identity in Panama. He not only valued the benefits of Panama, but used them to

[31] Although this particular style of suit did not become popular until the 1940s in the United States, this example demonstrates the longevity and evolution of the Colón man as cultural icon. Other sources pay more attention to the accessories the Colon Man carried such as the pocket watch. Despite fashion shifts, the meaning of the clothing and accessories remained intact for 100 years.

[32] Cedella Marley- Booker & Taj Mahal, "Colón Man," performed by Cedella Marley- Booker *Smilin' Island of Song*, (CD), 1992.

[33] Olive Senior, "The Origins of 'Colón Man´ Jamaican Emigration to Panama in the Nineteenth Century," in *Regional Footprints: The Travels and Travails of Early Caribbean* Migrants, Ed, Annette Insanally (Latin American-Caribbean Centre (LACC), 2006) 64.

better himself as is evident with his suit and pocket watch. The Colón man was self made and served as a manifestation of Jamaican agency and ambition. As a result, he provides the foundation for the later West Indian immigrants to construct a collective a cultural identity that fortifies the West Indian community later on during the American period of construction.

In addition to the Colón man image serving as an inspiration for black Jamaican migration, the French used false promises while recruiting in hopes of enticing Jamaicans to help with the construction of the French canal. According to Petras, high ranking Panama Canal Company officials made verbal promises to Jamaicans that they did not intend to fulfill, such as saying that migrants could return whenever they liked as if they had full mobility unregulated by the Panama Canal Company which contracted them.[34]

When the French began to suffer from the economic, logistical, and disease-related challenges of Panama, the West Indian migrants bore the weight of these troubles. West Indians were responsible for clearing the dense jungle in Panama as well as excavating land for the canal. This often included laying dynamite and working in labor gangs digging through the most difficult portions of the canal path.[35] Despite French construction efforts, Panama's landscape and environment proved to be tenacious as the jungle and hurricane season constantly impeded any significant progress.[36] Michael Conniff notes that the Jamaican governor estimated about 1,000 men left every month in

[34] Petras, 99.

[35] Ibid. 112-113.

[36] Ibid., 106.

1883 with those numbers consisting of mainly artisans from large cities.[37] By 1884 the Jamaican migration to the French Canal reached its peak with 14,192 workers arriving in Colón via ships and increasing from 1883 by nearly 50% or 10,000 workers.[38] This spike in the number of arriving workers also appeared with the higher number of deaths in Panama, which increased from 6,287 in 1883 to 17,615 by 1884.[39] West Indian high death rates occurred because of poor living conditions including crowded housing that historian Elizabeth Petras described as "permanent abodes of disease, lacking as they were even the most elementary provisions for health protection."[40] The tropical climate and these living conditions made disease more common among West Indians than among the French officials who lived in a "protected enclave" untouched by the conditions black Jamaicans had to endure.[41] These high death rates correlated with racist beliefs that West Indians served as better workers because their home countries had a tropical climate similar to Panama's, thus making them immune to diseases such as malaria and yellow fever.[42] In fact they had no enhanced immunities to these diseases.

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[37] Conniff, 20. Conniff makes the case that many migrants during the early period of migration were skilled laborers. Newton profiles the typical West Indian immigrant that migrates after 1904 as being illiterate and working in unskilled professions on their home islands.

[38] "Statistics of Migration Between Jamaica and Panama," original cited in *The Silver Men: West Indian Labour Migration to Panama, 1850-1914*, Ed. Velma Newton (Kingston 6, Jamaica: Ian Randle Publishers, 2004), 84.

[39] "Death Rate Per Thousand Canal Workers, 1881-1888," original cited in *The Silver Men: West Indian Labour Migration to Panama, 1850-1914*, Ed. Velma Newton (Kingston 6, Jamaica: Ian Randle Publishers, 2004), 118.

[40] Quoted in Petras, 107.

[41] Petras, 106.

[42] Lewis, 25 and Petras 108-111.

Due to rampant disease and the French Panama Canal Company's financial mismanagement and scandal, Ferdinand De Lesseps's dream of an inter-oceanic canal died by 1889. When De Lesseps started his construction project he estimated that the project would cost 600 million gold Francs and would take only eight years to complete. However, by 1885, the total expenditure estimates had increased to 1.2 billion gold Francs. This resulted from unforeseen costs such as purchasing the American Panama Railroad for $20 million the duration of the construction as well as taking out three loans to cover the rising construction costs and to pay the construction firms. Initially, investors and ordinary French people celebrated the attempt to build this canal following the success of Suez, so they bought bonds in order to help finance the project. The successful return for investors following the completion of the Suez Canal spurred French citizens to participate in another major global project that would redefine the world and reestablish France as a global power. Also, canal officials listed a lower cost of construction than estimated allowing French citizens to feel more comfortable about buying more bonds for this national project.[43] Nonetheless, the lack of progress half way through the 1880s left French citizens disillusioned about the dream De Lesseps had sold to them. The Panama Canal Company tried to increase its stocks by selling special lottery bonds, but this final attempt to recover the lost capital failed. As a result, De Lesseps and his leadership bribed bank employees, the press, and politicians in order to conceal the company's inability to repay investors or bond holders. Once the scandal came to light, De Lesseps and the Canal Company officially declared bankruptcy and the lucrative

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[43] Petras, 86-87.

French Canal endeavor ended the French goals of imperial conquest in the western hemisphere in the 19th century.[44]

The highly anticipated Panama Canal remained a major concern for the region and the French failure only provided the opportunity for another imperial power to take command and assert its dominance over the western hemisphere. On May 1, 1889, the American operated *Daily Star and Herald* reported that the Panama Canal Company had declared bankruptcy. A writer by the name of Belisario discussed how the French failure had given Colombia[45] the chance to open negotiations with the United States to construct the canal because it was a global need. He writes that Colombia "should rely upon no other assistance for the spread of our industries…which can be given by our brothers of the North since…only American interests should prevail throughout the breadth and length of the land."[46] By the 1890s, the United States began to shift its attention to building the canal to assert its dominance as a world power. The bankruptcy of the Panama Canal Company and the global humiliation of the French reverberated across the imperial world, but it held a special significance for the unskilled black laborers who became the exploited marginal population that suffered from imperial decisions for global and technological dominance.

As the shift from French to U.S. control of the canal-building project began to unfold in 1889, black Jamaicans had the opportunity to return to their colonial home no

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[44] Ralph E. Avery, "The French Failure," *America's Triumph in Panama,* ed. Ralph E. Avery (Chicago, IL: The L.W. Walter Company, 1913), 45-68.

[45] Panama was a province of Colombia until 1903, therefore, the construction of the canal needed to be supported by officials in Bogotá, Colombia.

[46] Belisario, "The Panama Canal," *Daily Star and Herald*, May 1, 1889.

wealthier than when they arrived. As French imperial conquest in Panama dissipated, many of its black Jamaican workers remained stranded in Panama requiring the assistance of the British colonial government to repatriate them.[47] The *Daily Star and Herald* published information for black Jamaicans explaining how the British colonial government planned to finance stranded workers' return trips. On February 15, 1889, a notice in the *Daily Star and Herald* sent from the colonial government stated that the destitute workers needed to communicate with the British Consulate in Panama to arrange for repatriation to Jamaica.[48] In March of the same year the *Daily Star and Herald* ran a notice about how the British colonial government in Jamaica selected a representative to handle the repatriation of the destitute Jamaicans on the Isthmus. The writers implied that the commitment of the government to repatriate this large number of stranded laborers was not economically sound because Jamaica, due to its struggling sugar industry, was not a "flourishing country."[49] The article continued by saying, "the people now suffering here were repeatedly warned by the Government not to leave the island."[50] The colonial government ruled by the plantocracy did not benefit from Jamaicans migrating to Panama to build the French Canal. It is surprising that the plantocracy allowed their workers to leave. A possible but improbable explanation is that the government arranged the deal with the French Canal Company without considering

[47] Westerman, 340.

[48] "The Following Cable," *Daily Star and Herald*, February 15, 1889, Cover.

[49] "A Notice," *Daily Star and Herald*, March 8, 1889, Cover.

[50] Ibid., Cover.

the wishes of the plantocracy who relied on the labor of the black Jamaicans.[51] A more logical explanation is that the government allowed the workers to leave in response to the tension on the island following the Morant Bay Rebellion. Repatriation of Jamaican workers enabled the British colonial government, and more specifically the plantocracy, to regain control over its black population and restrict black expression of freedom through migration. The Canal project had created an escape valve that the workers and plantocracy could welcome.

By 1890, black Jamaicans had to choose whether they wanted to return to live under a British colonial system or stay in Panama in hopes that canal construction would resume. The *Colonial Report No. 112* for 1889 states that 3,184 laborers left for Panama in 1889 following the end of the French construction while 11,671 returned with an estimated 6,000 remaining on the Isthmus after choosing not to petition the British consulate by the end of the repatriation period in May of 1889.[52] The broken dream of Panama forced many black Jamaicans to again reevaluate their position in the changing political world. Although the French Canal Company declared bankruptcy the year before, the continued migration of Jamaican laborers to Panama shows that many still felt that Panama provided a better life than the plantation wage labor available on the island.

Despite their initial hope of a revival of the construction, black Jamaicans became more disenchanted with the idea that migration to Panama would offer greater freedom

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[51] Correspondence Between High Ranking Jamaican Officials and French Canal Company, May 1, 1885, French Canal Company Records, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD.

[52] Henry A. Blake, *Her Majesty's Colonial Possessions. No. 112. Jamaica. Report on the Blue Book for 1888-9* (H.M. Stationary Office, 1889), 17.

and economic improvement. Articles published in the *Daily Gleaner* throughout the 1890s show how Jamaica as a whole depended on the construction of the Panama Canal because it brought the country much needed revenue in the form of remittances Canal workers sent to their struggling families especially after Parliament passed the Sugar Duties Act. A July 3, 1894 article states that, "The interest in the Panama Canal is practically dead in Jamaica."[53] The disillusionment of black Jamaicans was tied to how the French imperial machine exploited the labor of black Jamaicans only to allow the population to suffer the greatest ills of the failed construction attempt: disease, financial distress, abandonment and death. However, this introduced the hope that Great Britain would take over the project and use it to benefit the empire. In spite of Jamaica's anti-colonialism, the struggling colony still recognized how the British Empire might facilitate the completion of the canal. Given Jamaica's impoverished economy, British imperial oversight of canal construction was preferable to plantation labor in a declining and weakened sugar economy. Anti-colonialism could not entirely prevent Jamaicans from appealing to the paternalistic nature of British colonialism and the enormous power and prestige of the British Empire to save the black population and the island from further impoverishment and economic decline.

While the United States continued to rise in the background as an imperial power, repatriated black Jamaicans returned to their status as wage laborers and the colonial government blamed the repatriated Jamaicans for the rise in criminal activity in Jamaica in the years following the failed French canal. The 1895 *Colonial Report No. 134* states

[53] "The Panama Canal," *The Daily Gleaner*, July 3, 1894, n.p.

that the majority of the violent crimes committed in Jamaica in the previous year could be attributed to the unemployed workers who returned from Panama.[54] The colonial government actively participated in demonizing its black laborers who worked and desired to work in Panama and stereotyped them as radical and ungrateful Jamaicans who criticized colonial rule. As the United States gained more traction in securing the Panama Canal construction project by buying the remaining property from the reinvented version of the French Panama Canal Company, black Jamaicans were aware of the larger political changes that once again started to take place only 613 miles away in Panama. By 1902 the United Sates participated in serious negotiations with Colombia over the construction of the Panama Canal and the world watched in anticipation to see if the young nation could do what France could not.

By October 1903 when the United States helped Panama secure its independence from Colombia, the British colonial government of Jamaica declared Panama a "Proclaimed Place" prohibiting the easy migration of workers to work on any project controlled by another global power under the Emigrant Protection Law of 1902.[55] Lancelot Lewis incorrectly argues that the colonial government of Jamaica placed these restrictions on black Jamaicans following the failure of the French canal in order to protect the laborers from American racism.[56] But it is also important to note that the

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[54] H. Bengough. *Colonial Reports. Annual. No. 134. Jamaica. Annual Report for 1893-4* (London: H.M. Stationary Office, 1895), 29.

[55] Colonial Secretary of Jamaica, "The Emigrant Protection Law 1902," *The Acts of Jamaica Passed in the Year 1902* (Kingston, Jamaica: Government Printing Office, 1902) 62-68.

[56] Lewis, 30.

passage of this law enhanced the colonial government's desperate attempt to maintain control over its black population by keeping them chained to the island as their ancestors had been during slavery. In order for black Jamaicans to participate in an economic venture in a Proclaimed Place, they needed to pay approximately £1 for a departure tax and have two landowning sponsors with properties valued at a combined £10 in the event they needed to be repatriated back to the colony if the project failed like the French canal attempt.[57]

By giving Panama the distinction of a Proclaimed Place, the British colonial government recognized the United States as a rising rival. By 1899 the imperial power and presence of both the Spanish and the French had been discredited in the western hemisphere via Spain's defeat in the Spanish American War in 1898 and the French failed construction of the Panama Canal. Therefore, Great Britain's major competitor shifted from its historical European rivals to the United States, one of its former colonies. As a result, the Emigrant Protection Law of 1902 served as a scapegoat to prevent the United States from taking advantage of Jamaica's weak economy to attract laborers to its canal construction. For example, a January 16, 1904 article in *The Daily Gleaner* states that "By allowing the labourers[*sic*] to leave Jamaica we are injuring our island and its agricultural prospects, and it would be almost impossible to absolutely prevent Jamaicans from seeking work on the canal."[58] Since *The Daily Gleaner* catered to the white

[57] Winston James, *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia: Caribbean Radicalism in Early-Twentieth Century America* (London: Verso , 1998), 28-29.

[58] Quoted in Newton, 56.

minority in Jamaican society, the article reflects the biases of the plantocracy who felt that the American construction posed a problem for the plantation system on the island which relied on the black labor. The plantocracy's attempt to prevent black Jamaicans from migrating proves that despite the failure of the French Canal, black Jamaicans still saw Panama as their land of opportunity. Hence, Jamaican agency was not destroyed when it encountered adversity, but rather it became fortified and expanded.

Although the colonial government of Jamaica tried to restrict the freedom and mobility of its black population, black Jamaicans still made the effort to pay the tax and migrate to work on the American canal starting in 1904. The law further alienated black Jamaicans as race continued to serve as a barrier to gaining positions of power. Jamaica's racialized class system remained firmly intact. Black Jamaicans no longer qualified as free independent persons as they did in Panama but became reincorporated as a part of the collective peasantry.[59] Furthermore, colonial officials facilitated the immigration of East Indian laborers to places such as Jamaica to work in the sugar fields as a response to black Jamaicans wanting other options away from the plantations. The Indian laborers received higher pay than the black workers demonstrating how the colonial government perpetuated a system of economic subordination of for its black subjects.[60] The continual political and economic disenfranchisement that black Jamaicans faced after the passage of the Emigrant Protection Law rekindled the latent desire to migrate to Panama as the Colón man's image continued to permeate the Jamaica recent collective cultural memory.

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[59] "The Position of the Negro," *The Daily Gleaner*, October 8, 1900.

[60] Great Britain West India Royal Commission, *Report of the West India Royal Commission 1897* (H.M. Stationary Office, 1897), 255.

The Birth of Hercules

Western imperialists from France and Great Britain only wanted to use the black populace for the benefit of their empires. Petras states that "The black workers had become identified internationally as a force for onerous, debilitating, and poorly remunerated work as a result of the needs of capital within the world economy at this stage."[61] When the United States began its venture of constructing the Panama Canal, the emerging imperialist power easily and effectively adopted this method of imperialism that depended on the labor of black West Indians. The United States saw West Indians, particularly Jamaicans, as the most viable workforce necessary for the canal construction; The U.S. especially valued the West Indian laborer as an industrious Anglophone who showed interest in being considered as an "independent British subject."[62] The United States lied to West Indians that they would be able to improve their status if they migrated to Panama to work on the Canal just like French recruiters did in the 1880s. The exploitation of the Jamaican immigrants' labor and their desire to have social mobility functioned as an empire building strategy that benefited the United States during the recruiting process.[63] The desire to have Jamaicans provide the majority of the labor for the American construction in 1904 was complicated by the Emigrant Protection Law of 1902 which made it difficult for Jamaicans to migrate to Panama after the French failure

[61] Petras, 106.

[62] Hanes, Report, 1904.

[63] Lewis, 31.

and the Jamaican government's response of repatriating stranded workers. This forced the United States to seek workers from other British West Indies islands that were faced with similar problems of economic deterioration after the collapse of the sugar industry as well as overcrowding.

By 1904, Ezachariah Gibson and his wife heard of the American construction in Panama and realized that this was the chance to provide a better life for their two children and show them a world outside of the small confines of their village of Epsom, St. Mary, Jamaica. Ezachariah came of age during the latter years of the attempted French canal into the 1890s, so he knew of the dangers that awaited him in Panama. Yet the image of the Colón man circulated in the collective cultural memory of the black population which showed that Panama still held the possibility of a more financially secure life away from the British colonial yoke. The ICC only recruited 47 Jamaicans during the ten years America funded the construction of the canal in Panama; therefore, Ezachariah left for Colón, Panama on his own volition seeking to better the lives of his wife and two children. Nothing is known about how Ezachariah received the money for the ticket or the required sponsors to fund this mission to pursue his freedom, yet he represents the evolution of black Jamaican agency from the end of the French period in 1889 to the start of the American period in 1904. Newton notes that West Indian workers did not typically migrate with their families during the early years so it is possible that Ezachariah migrated later on during the American Canal construction and therefore he was able to bring his family.[64] This opens the possible explanation for how Ezachariah, a small

[64] Newton, 103.

farmer in rural Epsom, St. Mary, Jamaica, was able to migrate after he had saved enough money for the tickets.

The story of Ezachariah Gibson and his family is the story of black Jamaicans renegotiating their position in an increasingly globalized world. Ezachariah joined the population of West Indian immigrants leaving the land where their fathers worked as slaves in search of redefining their freedom no matter the uncertainty. He and his family epitomize this history of West Indian migration in the midst of empire building. The personal stories of workers, such as Ezachariah, serve as an important factor in understanding the people who built the Canal but who are not recognized for their sacrifices in the history of the Canal. In these stories migration is not solely for bettering one's economic and social standing. It also operates as a political statement where members of the African Diaspora can express their discontent with an imperial power by taking their labor to another. In this case the shift occurred from the British colonial plantations to the French Canal and eventually to the American Canal.

The Panama Canal construction contained many benefits for the United States who gained wealth with control over shipping and transportation, but it also served as a way to encourage the growth of West Indian agency in the early twentieth century. West Indian immigrants faced high death rates, and racial discrimination when they migrated to the American project. Furthermore, family members that relied on remittances had to wait for months to receive a letter detailing how their loved one was killed on the job creating a delayed nonetheless still traumatizing experience for West Indians who

remained on the islands.[65] Despite these negative conditions that grew in the hostile imperial space of Panama, West Indian migration continued until the final year of construction because of images such as the Colón man which showed it as a place of possibility for the struggling black Jamaican or Barbadian. Although the completion of the Canal is celebrated as an American triumph, the invisible stories of what happened to the migrant workers who supplied the majority of the labor and their families are left out of the canal discourse. A better understanding of why the first group of immigrants migrated to work on the French Canal and the challenges they faced helps to lay the foundation for understanding how a West Indian narrative and collective identity developed during the American construction period starting in 1904 and expanded after the Canal's completion in 1914.

[65] Greene, 132.

Chapter III.

The Silver Burden:

American Racism, West Indian Labor, and the Panama Canal, 1904-1914

Ezachariah Gibson, like other Jamaicans, looked southwest to Panama with hope and the possibility of a better, more financially secure life away from the colonial yoke of a British Crown Colony. Ezachariah and his family probably left behind any land they held and immigrated to Colón after paying the necessary departure tax. Julie Greene notes "the steep emigration tax imposed on Jamaicans by their government meant that those who traveled to the Zone were more likely to have some resources, skills, and education."[66] They knew neither what lay ahead of them nor that Ezachariah would die in a railroad accident shortly after his son was born, but they knew their lives should not be tethered to the system of wage labor in Jamaica. The lives of workers such as Ezachariah serve as the hidden force behind the success of the Panama Canal. By understanding how the lives of these workers intersected with their work on the Canal, we can understand how marginalized people create a space in a society despite the undesirable circumstances. These stories clarify how black people in the diaspora continued to define freedom in a time that was racially oppressive. This Afro-diasporic narrative centers on the crucial definition of freedom and how freedom is defined and expressed.

[66] Greene, 128.

Ezachariah's story represents the beginning of the second wave of labor migration to work on the Panama Canal during the American period of construction. Following the French period, the American Isthmian Canal Commission began to recruit from the entire Caribbean, mainly focusing their energies on the overpopulated and impoverished British colonies. The economic deterioration that affected Jamaica extended to other British isles as well with the enactment of The Sugar Duties Act in 1846. As explained earlier, the law removed the monopoly that the British West Indies had on the exportation of its sugar in lieu of Brazilian or Cuban which were sold at a lower cost due to the continued existence of slavery up until the late 1880s.

By 1904, the agricultural system of slavery had undergone major shifts due to the socio-economic rise of a large peasant population in the Caribbean islands. The dream of moving up the social ladder became increasingly difficult for former slaves without certain political or familial connections. These political and economic issues at home made Panama all the more alluring to the unemployed West Indian man. Panama became a sort of Promised Land for West Indians trying to escape the socially and economically stagnant role assigned to them in the British colonial system which required them to function as primarily wage laborers on the plantations despite the declining production and profits of former cash crops such as sugar. The ICC capitalized on the large West Indian migration to Panama to work on the American project by tasking the black West Indians with performing the dangerous jobs. The large number of West Indians that migrated to Panama had worked on plantations as wage laborers, but a select few were trained artisans. By forcing all West Indian workers into unskilled labor positions, the

ICC prevented West Indians from having any skilled leadership positions during the project which were reserved for white Americans. The ICC needed to find a way to subjugate and control this large West Indian population to ensure the Canal project ended on schedule without any problems. The large population of West Indians on the Isthmus proved to be a challenge for an imperial machine such as the ICC. In order to protect the power of the ICC, race was used as a determining factor for who should have access to better pay, housing, and luxuries such as organizations such as the YMCA. Using racial segregation to create a glass ceiling for West Indian workers, the ICC successfully capped the economic potential and mobility West Indians workers could attain while securing their labor for the construction.

In order to make distinctions between the white Americans who worked on the Canal and all other groups of people, the ICC implemented a pay scale system called the Gold and Silver roll. Gold and Silver roll employees received different benefits that established American segregation in the young country of Panama and strengthened racial constructions that had evolved in Panama during slavery. The name of the system emerged from the way employees were initially paid: white Americans received gold American coins and the West Indians and other people classified as Silver received silver Panamanian coins for payment. Gold roll employees consisted of mainly white Americans and they were entitled to a larger salary, more comfortable living arrangements, access to various social clubs such as the YMCA, and a six-month paid vacation back to the United States to recuperate from the toll the Panamanian climate took on their bodies. In contrast, the Silver pay scale category contained mainly West

Indians who were not given such luxurious bonuses but were presumed to be better suited for the harsh climate of Panama because the Caribbean islands have the same tropical climate.[67] During the early years of construction, between 1905 and 1908, the Gold roll included West Indians, non-American whites, and African Americans, but they were soon removed until solely white American men were considered Gold employees.

The system eventually evolved to be more than just a difference in salaries and benefits. It replicated the Jim Crow South with segregated bathrooms and other public facilities. The Gold and Silver system was the product of American racism in Panama and it became a defining factor in the lives of the West Indian workers for the duration of the Canal project between the years of 1904-1914. The inequalities that emerged under the Gold and Silver system of the ICC shows how American racism managed to be integrated into a different national and economic context where it created negative consequences for the West Indian laborers. Although subjugating and mistreating servile labor was not unusual or unique, this particular case reveals the global dynamics of a particular American racial version of discrimination against workers. Furthermore, it demonstrates how these American ideologies and methods could become part of a global construction of blackness defined as inferior and whiteness deemed superior.

Enter Hercules

[67] Vaughan Cornish, "The Panama Canal in 1908," *The Geographical Journal* 2 (1909): 177.

Fifteen thousand Barbadian men stood ready to disembark from a steamer dressed in what appears to be their best set of clothing.[68] The deck of the ship was crowded with black faces while in the background the boat drew closer to land. These men arrived in Cristobal, Panama in 1909 after six days of traveling in uncomfortable cramped sleeping arrangements and eating meager meals. These young men left their overcrowded and impoverished island homes with the hope of being a part of being able to have a better life. Many were within the ages of twenty-one and forty as 36.9% of all deaths that occurred in following the year, 1910, came from this age group. The death rate of the men in these age groups was second only to the deaths from the ages of zero to twenty year old.[69] For many they never saw their homes again, but instead became one of the 4,500 West Indians that die from disease or construction accidents out of an estimated death toll of 5,609. All will become subjects of the Gold and Silver payroll segregation system implemented by Theodore Roosevelt's ICC to regulate the salaries of black people and white Americans. The quiet uncertainty on the men's faces is haunting considering that the new form of racial oppression they are about to encounter differed from the paternalistic colonial structure of the British colonies. These men helped to carve the earth open and built America's global empire in the early twentieth century. Nonetheless, despite the backbreaking labor these West Indians endure, they are still subject to American ideas and practices of black racial discrimination and segregation.

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[68] "Ship Bringing Fifteen Hundred Barbadians," in *The Canal Builders: Making America's Empire at the Panama Canal,* Ed. Julie Greene (London: Penguin Books, 2009), 174-175.

[69] Isthmian Canal Commission, *Deaths 1905-1910*, pg 18-19 Panama Canal Records, The National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD.

On January 10, 1905 Methodist Missionary Thomas Neely wrote to the President of the Members of the Missionary Board about his first week on the "Isthmus of Panama," citing his recent experience on its famed railroad. Neely predicted that the Panama Canal would cause "a radical change in the entire Republic of Panama," referencing how the English language was already beginning to become more prevalent on the Isthmus. He credited the presence of English primarily to the black Jamaicans that had migrated to Panama to work on the Canal.[70] The fact that Neely highlighted how Jamaicans were beginning to change the social demographics of Panama shows how quickly the West Indian population had grown in Panama during the early years of the construction. Later that year, in December and with a different tone, Neely wrote aboard a steamer headed back to Panama from Kingston, Jamaica. He noted the large number of black West Indians on the ship, including women and children, preparing to embark on their journey to Panama. He foreshadowed the difficult life that lay ahead for these West Indians in the Panama beginning with their deplorable living conditions aboard the ship.[71] Although these men, like other Jamaicans, knew of American racism, they had not experienced it firsthand. In addition, they had volunteered to work on the Canal as an opportunity to improve their lives. Thus, they could not have anticipated the manifestations of American racism in Panama and its negative impact on daily life and work. Nor did their fears supersede their desire for a new opportunity. Thus, many of

[70] Thomas Neely, *Letter to the President and Members of the Missionaries Board of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, Madison, NJ: United Methodist Archives Microfilms, January 10, 1905. Microfilm.

[71] Thomas Neely, *Letter to Dr. Carroll*, Madison, NJ: United Methodist Archives Microfilms, December 28,1905, Microfilm.

these men arrived not fully aware that they would face a new system of racial segregation where they co-existed with whites, Panamanians, and other nationalities.

In 1904, Peter Hains, veteran of the American Civil War and Spanish American War, writes that the West Indians from the British colonies were good workers and essential for the construction of the Canal. This piece was only written two months after the construction began and when workers were still in high demand for this monumental project. He refuted others who said technology would be the main factor in building the Canal. Instead Hains argues that the workmanship of the black West Indian was necessary for this project stating:

> He is fairly industrious; not addicted to drink; can speak English; has ambition, though it is chiefly to become an independent British subject; he is willing to work, but he must have an inordinate number of holidays…He is not deficient in intelligence, and he recognizes conditions that are favorable to bargain-making quite as readily as his northern neighbor. When the demand for labor becomes greater than the supply, he will be quick to grasp the situation and make the best of it.[72]

Hains depicted the West Indians as industrious, ambitious, intelligent, and good bargainers. While stating all of these attributes, Hains sees similarities between West Indian and white American values. Hains does not view the West Indians as equals, but rather as excellent workers who brought to the project these heralded work ethics. In doing so, he applauds West Indian ambition and depicts them as committed workers who are willing to help in the Canal effort. Referring to their intelligence, Hains believes West Indians were capable of handling the new machinery needed for the project. By highlighting the West Indian's absence of alcoholism, Hains validates their good

[72] Peter C Hains, "The Labor Problems on the Panama Canal," *The North American Review* 572 (1904): 50.

behavior and decorum as dependable workers. The ICC need not worry that disruptive behavior could hinder the progress of the construction. Yet, Hains describes a black person with bargaining skills, who knows that he is smart and who will use his intelligence to his advantage. The West Indian worker proved to be a contradiction to the early twentieth century image of black people. On one hand he had the intellect, work ethic, and cultural values of a dependable and efficient worker, while on the other hand these same characteristics made him think and act independently to protect his own interests. In response to its own needs and the American racial constructions of work, the ICC created a well crafted system of supervision to teach these proud black people their appropriate social and racial position in the Canal Zone.

Hains's ideal West Indian worker is physically strong, yet intelligent enough for this new form of modern construction but he has reservations about leaving them to govern themselves. He instead suggests that white Americans be brought in as the engineers and that there should be a division among the workers consisting of "a master-laborer or a master-engineer at the head of each."[73] This portends the start of the Gold and Silver pay scale implemented on the Canal Zone. This hierarchy claimed to be based solely on differentiated labor and skill but race determined how West Indians were perceived on the Canal Zone. Silver was relabeled black and Gold became, simply, white American. West Indians did not hold many skilled positions on the Canal Zone as noted

[73] Ibid., 52.

in the 1906 *Annual Report*.[74] West Indians worked on the Silver roll which was designed for the unskilled laborers. For example, Silver roll employees were not employed in the judiciary and legal departments and existed in small numbers in the executive office. The absence of West Indians in these positions eliminated any potential advocates for the plight of the West Indian worker and his possible complaints about the inequalities he faced. Also, in conjunction with the strong nationalism and separatism fostered by their colonizers in each island,[75] the lack of major social and political leaders during the early years of the construction prevented West Indians from unifying against this system of racial discrimination and oppression imposed on them by Americans. This unification of the otherwise disparate West Indian identities changed the focus from unique individual groups, such as the Jamaicans and Barbadians, into a collective West Indian identity that continued to evolve in Panama. As the West Indian community's unified presence grew stronger in the midst of American racist practices, so did West Indian agency and ambition.

In 1908, British geographer Vaughn Cornish describes workers' living conditions in his report after four years witnessing the Panama Canal construction. The author states that in 1908, approximately 19,585 West Indian laborers worked on the Isthmus, but he highlights that many of the West Indians do not show up daily because of sickness, accidents, or laziness. Although Cornish views the West Indians as an essential

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[74] Isthmian Canal Commission, *Annual Report of the Isthmian Canal Commission for the Year ending December 1, 1906,1-127* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office 1906), 49-54.

[75] Julie Greene notes that Great Britain was famous for pitting its different Caribbean colonies against one another to prevent them from unifying against the Crown.

workforce to complete the Canal, he ignores how inhumane work conditions cause workers diseases and accidents and instead purports that the workers are inherently lazy.[76] However, West Indians, like many servile laborers, exercised their agency by being absent from work. Greene quotes a chief engineer, John Stevens, who saw a similar change in the population of workers during the week stating that the ranks were full on Monday but that the attendance gradually declined as the week progressed.[77] Like Cornish, Stevens shows his racist bias by saying the West Indians only work long enough to fulfill their animal wants, but Greene argues correctly that West Indians understood how the construction project worked and often quit a job in one division to change to another. Furthermore, according to Greene, the ICC only needed fourteen to fifteen thousand workers out of the estimated twenty-three to twenty-five thousand West Indians for the construction to be functional allowing approximately nine to eleven thousand workers to miss work on any specific day.[78] The ability to change their position in a largely organized imperial structure such as the ICC discredits notions that West Indians did not know that the ICC exploited their labor. Instead West Indians used their personal resistance mechanisms to constantly renegotiate their position in the American Canal project thus continuing the legacy of the Jamaican workers who understood the larger dynamics of the world when they decided to leave the stagnancy of Crown Colony Jamaica in 1881.

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[76] Vaughan Cornish, "The Panama Canal in 1908," *The Geographical Journal* 2 (1909): 169.

[77] Greene, 147.

[78] Ibid., 146-147.

The resilience of the West Indian spirit struggled against the imperial structures that the ICC had in place especially in regards to the inferior pay that West Indians received in comparison to white U.S. Gold roll employees. Cornish states that West Indian workers received an average of ten cents per hour for the work of either excavating earth, working in sanitation, or any other unskilled positions available to them for an eight hour day and were provided free lodgings by the ICC.[79] Despite what may have appeared as a generous offer by the ICC, thirty cents was subtracted after every eight hour day for meals, leaving West Indians with only fifty cents.[80] ICC officials were disappointed in the output of productivity by West Indians, but later attributed the lack of strength to poor diet. For this reason the thirty cents was taken from the paycheck to supposedly help fund better meals for the laborers. Though the salaries of West Indian Silver roll employees were garnished in order to fund the meals, they continued to show up to work in order to save their money to reach their goal of becoming the Colón man.

While Cornish's tone was racist towards the West Indians, he had nothing short of praise for the white American Gold member employees. Cornish praises how the ICC made a recent decree on February 8, 1908 making all future appointments to the Gold Roll solely for Americans.[81] These appointments made the racial segregation more

[79] Cornish contradicts other sources that state that the West Indians had to pay rent for ICC living quarters. His claim attempts to normalize the conditions that West Indians had to endure as workers to garner more support for a project that would benefit the globe by improving global trade.

[80] Cornish, 169.

[81] This decree does not distinguish between African Americans or white Americans although the Gold Roll included mainly white Americans. Some of my secondary sources have stated that during the early years of the construction, West Indians and African Americans sometimes made it to Gold status. These loopholes were later fixed making the caste system racially rigid.

defined, making it harder, and eventually impossible, for West Indians to ascend to the status of a Gold roll employee. These constraints protected the privileges of white Americans and not only provided them with more comfortable living arrangements than their Silver counterparts, but also afforded them access to additional extracurricular activities. Cornish describes the living conditions and food provided for the Gold Roll members as excellent (See Image 3). Furthermore, describes how YMCAs to accommodate the needs of the white Americans and their families with reading and writing rooms along with gymnasiums.[82] The Gold standard of living when compared with the Silver living conditions illustrates how the inequalities faced by the West Indians were not seen as a major concern. By establishing a Jim Crow American structure in Panama that provided inhumane living and working conditions for West Indians, the ICC laid the groundwork for how West Indians would be defined as subhuman following the completion of the Canal.

Additionally, by holding the Gold members in such a high esteem and dehumanizing the lives of the West Indians, the author creates a stark contrast between the two major classifications. Cornish hoped to show Americans that Panama had essentially been tamed and that they could come help in the construction project and still have the comforts of home available to them; however, by introducing the negative perceptions of the West Indians during the construction of the Panama Canal and only highlighting their role as workers, Cornish automatically places the West Indians into a lower social category. Although Cornish was British, he undeniably supports the

[82] Cornish, 170.

American canal effort and has little regard for his fellow British citizens, the West Indians. His disregard for equality is troubling considering he is British and these West Indian men fell under the protection of the British Empire, yet they suffered under the segregation of the Canal Zone. White supremacy functioned as the dominant ideology instead of British nationalism in this case. West Indians did not receive help from their motherland, Great Britain, but instead were seen as subjects instead of citizens in the eyes of the British Empire. Although American racism managed to influence Canal Zone life, West Indians continued to work in the most arduous tasks of the construction. Despite West Indians constantly performing the more physical jobs for the construction, as stated before by Cornish, they were never completely appreciated or seen as valuable. The ICC's 1906 report presents how the ruling council felt that West Indians did not maintain the physical strength necessary for the project.[83] This constant image of West Indian inferiority became one of the foundational factors that fueled the rationale that West Indians could not be elevated to the Gold roll.[84]

One of the major manifestations of the inequalities West Indians faced appeared in their housing conditions where the ICC spent less money in an attempt to save money but in turn further dehumanized West Indian workers. The ICC 1906 *Annual Report* shows that approximately $567,793.12 was spent on the construction of houses for approximately 3,700 Gold roll employees while $74,823.20 was spent on the construction

[83] *Annual Report 1906,* 5.

[84] Whites were also tasked with doing the unskilled labor but these were mainly white European immigrants who came to work on the Canal construction. Furthermore, the ICC threatened Spaniard unskilled workers with termination because cheaper West Indian workers could be employed in their place. Greene, 179.

for approximately 13,300 Silver roll employees.[85] Expenditures were $153.46 for each Gold roll employee and $5.62 for each Silver roll employee. In *Things as They are in Panama* published in 1913 by The Century Company in London, pictures taken around the Canal Zone showed the reality of the lives of the West Indians living in Panama. The photographs of the West Indian living quarters support this data. For instance, one image shows the boxcar of a train converted into living quarters for workers; it served as a movable home so that the workers could be taken to other construction sites along the railroad when needed (See Image 1). The caption for this picture says that these West Indians, who were also called Zoners, were forced to live in these boxcars furnished with all the comforts of home.[86] In another picture a two story wooden tenement building called "Nuevo Kingston" references the Jamaican capital city of Kingston.[87] Every sheet-iron cooking place[88] on the veranda is the equivalent to one family in the picture. This building was possibly set aside for West Indian workers with families instead of bachelors (See Image 6). These family living arrangements allowed West Indian families to live together therefore, the male worker was constantly aware that any negative actions against the Gold and Silver system could have negative consequences for his family such as losing his job. Nonetheless, the fact that some West Indian families were placed in buildings instead of houses is a signifier of the inequalities Silver roll employees faced during the Canal construction.

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[85] *Annual Report,* 127.

[86] Harry A. Franck, *Things as They are in Panama* (London: The Century Company, 1913), 238.

[87] Franck, 59.

[88] Stove.

The segregated Gold and Silver payroll system created an environment where the ICC did not see West Indian housing as a priority. These substandard arrangements forced the West Indians into a subhuman category changing them from people to animals in the eyes of imperialist supporters of the Canal construction. The inhumane state created by the Gold and Silver system for West Indians caused their identity to be continuously linked to their substandard housing which served as a breeding ground for disease.

The cramped living quarters provided by the ICC were inadequately built to sustain the lives of the Silver worker. Substandard living conditions precipitated frequent outbreaks of disease in the West Indian community. For example, in between the wooden walkway and the homes, puddles of stagnant water collected forming a breeding ground for mosquitoes that functioned as vectors for diseases such as malaria and yellow fever (See Image 5). The single windows on the houses and the doors were not equipped with screens to prevent the mosquitoes from entering when opened. The absence of mosquito nets contributed to the large number of West Indians who became ill due to tropical diseases.[89] The overt disregard of the West Indian communities appeared out of the earlier belief that West Indians naturally survived better in the tropical climate of Panama in spite of evidence to the contrary.

The ICC's reports on disease and death rates contradicted the belief about West Indian immunities to tropical diseases and their natural hardiness for tropical climates. In 1906 the major causes of death were pneumonia with 413 deaths and malarial fever with

[89] "Typical Housing Provided by ICC for West Indians." in *The Canal Builders: Making America's Empire at the Panama Canal*, Ed. Julie Greene (London: Penguin Books, 2009): 174-175.

224. [90] The 1907 report shows that black workers suffered from 96% of the pneumonia deaths in contrast to whites at only 3%. In the same year the malarial death rate for blacks was at 82% at 110 out of 133, five times the number of whites at 23 which only accounted for only 17%. The inequalities extended to the accidental death rates with 61% of the 142 attributed to blacks compared to 39% for whites. The West Indians' substandard and hazardous living conditions, especially housing, created greater exposure to diseases.

Since West Indians worked under the Silver classification, they did the more dangerous construction tasks putting them at a greater risk of death or injury from a construction accident, in contrast to their Gold role counterparts who tended to have more managerial and engineering positions. The majority of the deaths organized by nation during 1907 came from Panama with 1,182, Jamaica with 590, and Barbados with 485.[91] The overall deaths were originally categorized by the pay distinctions from January to November in 1906 but in December the ICC replaced Gold and Silver categories with white and black respectively.[92]

Four years later in 1910, the deaths rates did not improve but continued to show a connection between the inequalities that West Indians and their families faced and their higher percentage of death in comparison to other populations. Between January 1910

[90] Many of the secondary sources support these two numbers but the statistics only show 47 deaths related to accidental traumatisms, which is also noted in the secondary sources as a major contributing factor to the deaths of the workers.

[91] Ibid., 14.

[92] On the records of deaths kept between the years of 1905 and 1910, the race of the deceased appears on ICC records starting on May 2, 1906. Isthmian Canal Commission, *Deaths 1905-1910*, pg 18-19, Panama Canal Records, The National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD.

and March 27, 1910, approximately 184 people died between the ages of 0-100 with the 0-20 bracket accounting for 45.1% of the deaths which is largely attributed to the high infant mortality rate that permeated the Canal Zone. The inadequate housing provided by the ICC for West Indians left them exposed to a wide array of tropical diseases that would greatly contribute to these higher death rates. Of the total deaths within the first three months of 1910 only 12 were not listed as black and only accounted for 6% of these total deaths. Furthermore, the majority of those that died and were listed as black were either Jamaican with 75 deaths, Panamanian with 29, or Barbadian with 20, in total making up 67.9% of those that died. The other 25% was a mixture of people from different islands in the Caribbean basin also listed as black. The large death toll of these populations indicates how the standard interpretations of white supremacy tailored for the Canal project subjected West Indians to subhuman treatment and dangerous labor conditions on the Isthmus.

A final statistic that helps to paint a picture of life on the Canal Zone for a West Indian migrant laborer shows that after the 0-20 year old bracket, 36.9% of those that died were within the ages of 21-40, the prime age for men to work as unskilled laborers. This bracket holds special significance because most of the deceased are men. Since the construction of the Canal and work on the associated railroad were the most lucrative labor options for a black West Indian, it is safe to assume that the Canal construction

affected the deaths of these men more intimately due to either the mediocre living conditions or work related accidents. [93]

On August 15, 1914, the Panama Canal opened to the world. After over 400 years of explorers and empires dreaming of a channel to connect the two largest oceans, the impossible was accomplished. America was no more an ambitious young nation; instead it had become the newest power in an increasingly complicated global political structure. With the outbreak of World War I only three weeks prior to the completion of the canal, America had solidified its position in the world which in turn would define how the United States interacted with other countries particularly those in the Western hemisphere. Although the Canal marked an important milestone in the development of America's global twentieth century American identity, the Canal also represented the horrors that imperialism and racism could spawn.

The drive for productivity forced the construction of the Panama Canal to operate like similar racially based labor systems that played an integral role in the development of the United States. The Gold and Silver payroll not only incorporated the practices of Jim Crow segregation but the demand for worker output by the Silver workers mirrored the dynamics that existed during slavery between slave and overseer/master and under sharecropping between sharecropper and plantation owner. Although racial constructions and discrimination also shaped labor, cultural, and political oppression for the Irish and southern Europeans, especially Catholics; the Chinese; and other marginalized groups, by the end of the 19th century, Americans and Europeans placed blackness at the bottom of a

[93] Isthmian Canal Commission, *Deaths 1905-1910*, pg 18-19, Panama Canal Records, The National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD.

racial hierarchy. For Americans in particular, almost three hundred years of slavery and Jim Crow combined had subjugated black workers to a subhuman status and made them dependent of the benevolence of their masters or creditors. Furthermore, the conditions that slaves and sharecroppers endured greatly resemble the conditions that Silver West Indian workers endured. All three groups worked long hours for little to no pay for their efforts, yet their supervisors grew wealthy from the labor of these black workers. Most importantly, race was the defining factor that separated the labor among these groups from white industrialized workers. The blackness of their skin made slaves, sharecroppers, and later West Indians subject to the ideologies of white supremacy that defined early twentieth century American racial constructions.

The ICC continued the model created by slavery and sharecropping to exploit the West Indians in order to gain lucrative rewards that trade in the Canal would bring. As with any other racially oppressive regimes such as Apartheid, police were used to ensure that the West Indian workers obeyed the autocratic rule of the ICC on the Canal Zone. The 1906 report shows that the ICC arrested 244 people for vagrancy.[94] Vagrancy arrests, like those in the Jim Crow South, are common among societies that require a high capital output from their lucrative industry. Given the influence American racism had on the ICC's policies, it is possible that these vagrancy arrests disproportionately affected the West Indian workers and served as a way to ensure that West Indians under ICC contract contributed to the imperial project and that workers respected the contract's conditions.

[94] *Annual Report 1906,* 73.

Since the study of the West Indian involvement in the construction of the Panama Canal has only recently emerged, much has yet to be examined. For example, scholars have not examined how American racism extended beyond physical and economic inequalities to the psychological. The constant propagation of American racial ideology affected blacks in the United States which is evident in the work done by Kenneth and Mamie Clark. Further research is needed to examine if the bombardment of American values changed West Indians' perceptions of race.[95] Also, a study of how the racism on the Canal differed yet correlated with the racism felt under colonialism provides insight into the global social constructions of race. These definitions of race that existed throughout the twentieth century validate W.E.B. DuBois's comments how the color line defined the new century--the twentieth century.[96]

The Panama Canal opens several doors for historians to examine this global definition of race as it is one of the first major examples where the world converged upon Panama such that all constituencies brought with them their unique cultures. Race became a reliable way to separate groups of people and protect the power of the ruling white minority. Unlike in the United States where the white population is the majority, a large West Indian community existed for nearly fifty years by the beginning of the American construction project, thus their definition of race evolved differently than that of America's three-hundred year old system. The ICC not only succeeded in building the

[95] Kenneth B. Clark and Mamie P. Clark, "Emotional Factors in Racial Identification and Preference in Negro Children," *The Journal of Negro Education* 1 (1950): 341-350.

[96] W.E.B. DuBois, "Of the Dawn of Freedom," *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Bantam Dell, 1989), 10. Original published W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk, (*Chicago, IL: A.C. McClurg & Co.,1903).

Canal, but it also imposed American values using the Gold and Silver roll system in the nascent country of Panama. The remnants of the segregationist policies of the ICC continued to affect the West Indian community in Panama after the construction was completed, but now the discrimination came from Panamanians who viewed the West Indians as inferior aliens who were corrupting their culture.[97] The Panama Canal is an example of how American cultural values can supersede those of the native country. Furthermore, the West Indian workers represent how these values freely created an autocratic state where race was a defining factor. Lastly, despite the inequalities faced in salaries, living/social conditions, and death rates, the West Indians were greatly invested in this project in hope of providing a better life for themselves and their families. The fortitude of these West Indian men to leave their small island enclaves and to play an important role in global history demonstrates the power of the human spirit over social constructions such as race.

[97] Khemani Gibson, "The Undesirable Immigrant: The West Indian's Cultural Struggle in Panama, 1914-1950," (Pan-African Studies Seminar Paper, Drew University, 2013), 9-12.

Chapter IV.

The Undesirable Immigrant:

The West Indian's Cultural Struggle in Panama, 1914-1949

On July 23, 1914 Ezachariah Gibson's name appears in the ICC's *Records of Births* with the birth of his third child.[98] Ezachariah and his wife Cleo like other members of the West Indian immigrant community began to make a life for themselves in Panama. The child, Vincent Gibson, was born in Panama during his father's work in the Canal Zone and although the territory was a U.S. Protectorate, the child inherited the citizenship from his father. Therefore, Vincent was considered Jamaican instead of Panamanian or American.[99] Shortly after his birth, Ezachariah who, according to family oral tradition served as a railroad conductor, was killed in a railroad accident. With the lost of the main source of income, Cleo took her three children back to Jamaica with what little money was available from her husband's work and death.[100] Following the completion of the Panama Canal in 1914, many West Indians, disillusioned by failing to achieve the status as the mythic Colón man, opted to return to their homelands with broken dreams. Nonetheless, a small group of West Indians still felt connected to Panama after their years spent laboring on the American Canal. Others were already a part of the second,

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[98] Isthmian Canal Commission, *Records of Births January 1910 to May 1917*, pg 80, Container 1, Panama Canal Records, The National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD.

[99] Ibid.

[100] This information concerning an accident insurance policy has not been confirmed by any ICC documents used for this paper.

third, or even fourth generation of West Indian descendants born in Panama considering that West Indians started migrating to Panama in the 1850s.

The continual immigration of West Indians to work on the Panama Canal from the 1850s to the 1910s, especially during the period of American construction, helped to refresh West Indian cultural practices and to establish a separate West Indian identity in Panama. A strong West Indian diasporic community evolved from this process. However, this entrenchment was not without its disadvantages. Panama's Jim Crow segregation practices and discrimination against the black West Indians relegated them to a second-class status in Panamanian society.[101] During the ten year American construction, the belief that West Indians were inferior under the American period of construction influenced how Panamanians treated the immigrant population. Panamanians came to view West Indians in a negative light thus complicating the relationship between the West Indians and their host country.

Between 1915 and 1920, approximately 13,000 West Indian workers returned to their home islands no wealthier than when they had arrived in Panama.[102] The ICC began laying off 79% of West Indians whose employment numbers plunged from 38,000 to 8,000 following the completion of the project. The ICC initially only kept those who agreed to pay rent for their Canal Zone living arrangements that came with a small plot of land to garden.[103] The other West Indians that stayed worked for some of the large

[101] Newton, 131.

[102] O'Reggio, 49.

[103] Ibid.

international corporations in Central America such United Fruit Company. According to Michael Conniff, Panamanians began to develop a love-hate attitude towards the 40,000-50,000 West Indians that decided to stay in Panama. Panamanian landlords and business owners originally requested that the Panamanian government ask the United States to allow West Indians to stay in they wanted to do so.[104] Panamanians needed the West Indians to support the Panamanian economy, but a job shortage in the 1920s radically changed the relationship between the two groups. As a result of the job shortage, Panamanians had to compete with West Indians for jobs because major corporations wanted them for their fluency in English. Panamanians needed the West Indians as consumers, but also resented the fact that they had stayed in the country and took away their job opportunities. Economic resentment from Panamanians became the first factor in a multi-tiered system of racial discrimination against West Indians that developed throughout the first half of the twentieth century in Panama. Nonetheless, the West Indian presence created a vibrant West Indian subculture and ethnic identity that Panamanians viewed as foreign and alien. Afro-Panamanians enjoyed the supposed racial democracy of Panama before the American Canal project redefined race, but with the transmission of the American racial stigma of blackness, Afro-Panamanians faced racial discrimination alongside West Indians. [105] The unwillingness of West Indians to assimilate into Panamanian culture made West Indians appear aloof and arrogant to the Panamanians.

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[104] John Biesanz, "Cultural and Economic in Panama Race Relations," *American Sociological Review* 6 (1949): 774.

[105] Conniff, 45-49.

Racial discrimination served as a tool used by the Panamanian government in an attempt to justify keeping West Indians in a non-citizen status.

The conflict between the two groups resulted from the American pressure both felt during the Canal project. Panamanians and West Indians responded to the pressure in two ways: (1) the Panamanians depicted the West Indians as alien invaders who were culturally inferior and (2) the West Indians did not have major incentives to assimilate into Panamanian society. Both pressures encouraged West Indians to preserve their culture. The survival of West Indian culture in Panama led to its cultural transference and inclusion into the larger Panamanian culture by the 1960s as is evident in West Indian inspired musical expressions. These cultural, political and socio-economic shifts require further analysis of the West Indians immigrant story in Panama by focusing on how West Indians managed to negotiate their identity in Panama, for example, the battle between cultural retention and the pressure to assimilate to Panamanian society after the Canal opened in 1914.

The United States' presence in Panama provided the catalyst necessary for the cultural warfare that took place between West Indians and Panamanians. American imperialism in Panama allowed American constructions of race to supersede those that the Spanish colonial government had introduced in the region. The U.S. construction of the Canal forced many groups of people to share one intimate space as marginalized populations, but the relationship between the West Indians and Panamanians is complicated by how American ideologies constructed both of these populations. The idea for a canal in Panama had existed for 500 years in the European imagination so the

American attempt did not appear as anything new. Instead America's success, where all others had failed, revealed an arrogant young nation that faced an insurmountable obstacle and triumphed. During the progress of the project America created unique identities for each group involved in the construction project. West Indians suffered the most because of racist American practices of white supremacy which deemed their blackness a sign of inferiority. Although managers and owners within the United States abused workers as a matter of course,[106] especially during this time period, race served as a major tool of labor oppression in this particular case. Thus, an analysis of West Indian workers in Panama and the evolution of their place in Panama cannot ignore or minimize the salience of the American racial constructions that defined the West Indian status during and after the building of the Canal. Still, the tenacity of the West Indians to fight for a better life undermined the power of these constructions produced in the Canal Zone.

American ideologies about race played a significant role in defining the Panamanian identity and Panamanians' place in the social hierarchy of the Canal. Like many Latin American nations, Panama had a very mixed population of people descended from European, African, and indigenous ancestry and used a *mestizaje* construction to define Panamanian identity. This concept of miscegenation developed among Spanish speaking countries because of the Spanish racial caste system established during the colonial period. This caste held several possible combinations that determined a person's racial identity and his/her social position. Although the caste was stratified, white European blood was deemed the best and seen as the most desirable while black African

[106] Haymarket Riot, May 4, 1886.

blood was labeled as the worse. *Mestizaje* in theory served as an equalizer by eliminating the *de jure* stratification by race although the white elite maintained power in Panama. This elite formed an oligarchy which represented a small minority in Panama as the majority of Panamanians existed along the wide spectrum of mixed heritage established by the Spanish. The only group that existed outside of this classification was the Afro-Panamanian population. [107] The number of Afro-Panamanians helped to give Panama the distinction of being the "black province" of Colombia prior to Panama's independence in 1903.[108] Despite Afro-Panamanians being identifiable as African descendants, Biensanz incorrectly claimed that prior to the American intervention, Panama was a racial democracy where race did not serve as a hindrance to anyone's success. [109]

The arrival of the Americans exacerbated the problems in Panama's highly stratified racial hierarchy and dissolved the false illusion of a racial democracy, leaving in its place a bifurcated racial construction of solely black and white identities. The aggressive racial reformations led by the ICC's segregation system forced the Panamanians to adapt to an American system in order to prevent any diplomatic hostilities between the two countries. Panama only became sovereign on November 3,1903 due to the political maneuvering and display of power by President Roosevelt that forced Columbia to grant Panama its independence. Panamanians felt indebted to the Americans for freeing them from the control of Columbia. However, what appeared as

[107] John Biesanz, "Cultural," 772.

[108] Ibid ., 777.

[109] Ibid., 773.

liberation to the Panamanians turned into a way for American imperialism to be exported. As a result, by intervening in local affairs, the United States brought American constructions of race into Panama. Panama became the protectorate of the United States and consequently was unable to construct its own identity outside of being the country where the Canal was located.

In an effort to preserve and strengthen the Panamanian national identity, Panamanians came to view the West Indians as intruders after the Canal was completed. Due to the influence of American racial attitudes, blackness became more openly despised regardless of the fact that Panama had a large Afro-Panamanian population dating back to the 1500s. The implementation of Southern Jim Crow racism demonized blackness. The system made Afro-Panamanians suffer along with the West Indians as second class citizens. Moreover it forced the white oligarchy to adopt U.S. practices as they showed preferential treatment to whites ending Panama's supposed racial democracy.

This political persecution received support from the majority of Panamanian citizens including the Afro-Panamanians who viewed themselves as cultural superiors to the West Indians. Afro-Panamanians made the claim that they differed from the West Indians not only because of language and nationality, but also in culture. The Spanish and British colonial slave systems helped to contribute to cultural differences in the Afro-Panamanians and West Indians despite sharing African roots. Biesanz explains the differences between the Spanish and British slave societies by saying, "Unlike the absentee owners of West Indian plantations, they [slaves in Spanish America] lived on

the *hacienda*, imparted much of their culture to their slaves and insisted on baptism and Christian teaching."[110] The Spanish made it their goal to Christianize their slaves whereas the British were more concerned about profits than proselytizing. Therefore, by the 20th century the Afro-Panamanians considered themselves Spanish because they had separated from their African traditions hundreds of years prior under the *hacienda* system.

By using these depictions, Afro-Panamanians were trying to return to their pre-American construction status in Panama as a part of the false racial democracy where race did not hinder success. Also, these descriptions were used in hopes of showing Americans how Afro-Panamanians differed from West Indians and why West Indians should be fired and replaced by the Panamanians who had roots in Spain. The continued emphasis on Spanish heritage revealed how American racism illuminated latent racial constructions introduced during the Spanish colonial period: the superiority of Spanish blood and culture over the African. If Afro-Panamanians had lived in a complete racial democracy, it should have been easy to return to a pre-American system that rejected racism. Since Panama had developed its own racial hierarchy, America's racial and cultural discrimination played an integral role in defining post-Canal Panamanian national identity. In other words, Panamanians did not resist American constructions of race. They embraced them.

[110] Biesanz, "Cultural," 772.

Panama's attempts to protect its national identity became crucial as West Indians continued to experience economic success although they were immigrants.[111] Struggling to establish a Panamanian global identity, Panamanians held firm to Spain as the foundation of their cultural heritage. Panamanians used European identity to assert their cultural superiority over West Indians because whiteness represented all things positive in comparison to blackness in the early twentieth century. By connecting Panama to a European tradition, the Panamanian government painted West Indian culture as being closer to Africa than Great Britain, thus legitimizing Panamanian racial resentment. Protecting Panama's connection to Spain, whiteness, and power became the criteria for global respectability. Connections to Africa and its descendants marred Panama's self-image of whiteness.

Consequently, Afro-Panamanians began to turn against the West Indians as they were often classified together because of their shared blackness. African features did not prevent Afro-Panamanians from being full citizens in Panama prior to American involvement, according to Biesanz. Afro-Panamanians were able to ascend the economic ladder without prejudice.[112] However, the discrimination against West Indians brought on by American racism during the construction of the Canal diminished the Afro-Panamanian position in Panama's racial democracy. To distinguish themselves, Afro-Panamanians claimed that they were phenotypically different than the despised West Indians who stole all the good jobs from the Panamanians. Biesanz says, "Panamanians

[111] Biesanz, "Cultural," 777.

[112] Ibid., 775-777.

profess to find[*sic*] the features of the old Panamanian Negro more refined and delicate, his bodily build more slender and graceful, [and] his hair smoother. In contrast, they describe the West Indian Negroes as coarse-featured, with thick lips, flat nose, and ungainly build."[113] Panamanians were both racist and xenophobic. West Indians were depicted as alien and African in comparison to the Afro-Panamanians, who are more Native Amerindian than black, creating a stark contrast between the two groups. The idea of *mestizaje* weakened connections between Panamanians and Africa all the while solidifying West Indians as being culturally African, stripping them of their British heritage and all of its attached notions of cultural superiority. This relegated them to the early twentieth century's constructions of blackness as culturally inferior because of the beliefs that descendants of Africans come from a legacy of savagery.

In addition, the American construction project also defined West Indians' place in the overall social structure of the Panama Canal. The racial definitions implemented by the ICC affected the West Indians in a greater number as they were more phenotypically connected to Africa than their Panamanian counterparts. Although both Panamanians and West Indians were being exploited by the ICC--Panamanians for their land and West Indians for their labor--the racial discrimination faced by West Indians forced them into a subservient position in the Canal Zone hierarchy. West Indians received substandard housing from the ICC and out of the approximate 6,000 people who died during the construction, 80% of those numbers were West Indian. The horrid living conditions

[113] Biensanz, "Cultural," 775.

provided for West Indians created the false illusion of inferiority in Panama.[114] These conditions were later used by the Panamanians to justify their racism and xenophobia that depicted the West Indians as pests to be removed from the pure Panama.

Nonetheless, West Indians achieved financial stability because according to Biesanz they were employed in larger numbers by international corporations than Panamanians.[115] The West Indian presence in Panama alone was estimated at 50,000.[116] While many West Indians stayed in the Canal Zone and the cities of Panama City and Colón, others migrated to the outer parts of Panama in *Bocas del Toro* to work on the banana plantations.[117] The higher employment numbers of West Indians resulted from their mastery of English which guaranteed employers a workforce who could accurately perform tasks without a translator. When the West Indians became wealthier, more employable, and better educated than the majority of Panamanians, the need to assimilate no longer existed. Many West Indians initially held onto their individual island identities but the overarching connection of a British cultural heritage allowed all English speaking West Indians to begin to unite as a collective community. This fostered a strong West

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[114] Khemani Gibson, "The Silver Burden: American Racism, West Indian Labor, and the Panama Canal, 1904-1914," (History Capstone Paper, Drew University, 2013), 17-18.

[115] Biesanz does not give an exact number of the population of West Indians employed by international corporations in comparison to Panamanians. This may raise serious questions about the legitimacy of his claim; however, it shows the values of these international organizations. With such a large, voluntary workforce that was willing to accept lower wages for more difficult jobs, listing the exact employment numbers of the unskilled laborers was not as important as knowing who the skilled laborers were.

[116] Biensanz, "Cultural," 774.

[117] Ibid.

Indian immigrant community which in turn angered Panamanians who sought to defend their culture in their own country.

In addition to being masters of the English language, West Indians had a reputation as reliable laborers making them even more likely to be hired over Panamanians. Due to the United States' continued involvement in Panama following the completion of the Canal, West Indians still provided the majority of the labor necessary to keep the Canal operational even if they received lower wages than their white counterparts. This heightened the resentment among the Panamanians who began to claim that the West Indians only did jobs that a respectable native Panamanian would not do, such as providing unskilled labor for the large international corporations. Panamanians felt the West Indians were "willing to work for low wages and live crowded into one room."[118] Panamanians looked down on West Indians because they did the jobs any self respecting Panamanian refused to do. Panamanians suffered from the influence of American racism as well as xenophobia. Although West Indians did menial, demeaning tasks, Biesanz states that they were able to move up in social status while many Panamanians stayed in poverty. He argued that many West Indians reached the same economic status as the middle and upper class Panamanians.[119] West Indians' ability to change their socio-economic standing in a society had been a major reason for the continuous migrations of West Indians to Panama starting in 1881. West Indian

[118] Biensanz, "Cultural," 776.

[119] Ibid., 776.

agency experienced a major triumph with the ability to finally be considered middle class and in a better financial and social position, even better than that of some Panamanians.

West Indians' ability to change their social position so drastically threatened Panamanian political power due to the way the immigrant population secured a strong rising middle class status. If Panamanians did not attempt to remove this newfound political presence, they feared the West Indians not only would successfully contaminate their culture, but would also assume political power. Consequently, Panamanians needed to demonize any positive attributes about West Indians to rationalize an anti-West Indian racial agenda of exclusion and discrimination. Panamanians manipulated the positive quality of West Indian's work ethic to reflect their racism with the phrase, "He works like a *chombo*." *Chombo* translates as "nigger" in American English, thus making the phrase a continued reference to West Indians being subhuman. [120] Like other racialized derogatory words, *Chombo* taps into the national consciousness of Panamanians and paints West Indians as "other" and therefore subhuman. By focusing on the jobs a *Chombo* did, Panamanian society labeled West Indians as inferior because they performed the hard labor that any self respecting Panamanian would not do. Lastly, the use of *Chombo* distances all Panamanians from the legacy of slavery and the idea of Africa. This label enables Panamanians to not only discriminate against West Indians, but also to seek out ways in which Panamanians could reaffirm their humanity by focusing on the Panama's connection to Spain.

[120] Newton, 145-148.

Contrary to how Panamanians attempted to depict West Indians as being more African, the West Indians that arrived during the American construction project exhibited a strong sense of pride in their British heritage. West Indians added to the tensions between the two groups as West Indians remained adamant about not solely retaining their islands' cultures but their British identity as well. It did not concern them if Panamanians accepted or rejected their community. Biesanz describes the Panamanian stereotype of West Indians as being "culturally inferior" going further to state that Panamanians saw them as, "Servile...superstitious, member[s] of strange and numerous religious sects,… flashily dressed though poorly fed...and prolific to a dangerous degree."[121] These ideologies mirror the ideas of European explorers and missionaries who tried to depict Africans as subhuman because of religious practices, superstitions, clothing, and living conditions. This description is used by ruling powers to construct the concept of otherness in order to legitimize discrimination. Panamanians felt West Indians were inferior because they continued to practice their African traditions that Panamanians considered devilish and pagan compared to their Roman Catholicism. The critique of West Indians' and their religious practices further distanced Panamanians from an African identity by trying to connect to a Spanish identity in order to distance themselves from the Africaness of the West Indians. Since West Indians provided the perfect combination of their British and Africa heritages, by connecting West Indians with Africa, Panamanians tried to exhibit cultural superiority despite the fact that Panama had a large slave population. This Panamanian contradiction and criticism also begs the

[121] Biensanz, "Cultural," 777.

question of the latent racial constructions that existed during Panama's supposed racial democracy prior to American intervention in the country. The layers of the racism, both overt and institutional, exhibited by the Panamanians towards West Indians add a new antagonist to the story of West Indian agency. In the period after the Canal, Panamanians utilized both their own constructions of race as well as the ideas of white supremacy brought to Panama by the ICC to construct a post-Canal Panamanian racial rhetoric to combat what they perceived to be a West Indian threat.

The concept that West Indians should not wear flashy clothing is connected to two themes in Panama's construction of race and society following the completion of the Canal. First, West Indians were not civilized and West Indians should show modesty in their dress. Panamanians argue that West Indians were irresponsible because of their choice of flashy clothes over proper food and nutrition, empowering the negative image that West Indians were unintelligent when compared to Panamanians. This argument parallels the justifications used for the enslavement of Africans since according to white supremacist thought they were uncivilized and slavery would help tame their savagery. The second aspect of clothing also connects to slavery as it was common in slave societies for slaves and free people of color to dress differently than white citizens to distinguish the differences between the races as well as classes. By criticizing the West Indians' dress, Panamanians not only tried to paint West Indians as unintelligent by their

desire for fancy clothes they could not afford, but furthermore they wanted to establish Panamanian dominance over these immigrants by using a hierarchal dress code.[122]

More importantly, in waging the campaign to vilify West Indians, Panamanians criticized the English that West Indians spoke in an effort to negate the perception that companies could employ West Indians because of their superior mastery of English in contrast to Panamanians the majority of who only spoke Spanish. Panamanians argued that West Indians spoke a "strange variety of English and a little broken Spanish." [123] By calling the language "strange," they compared West Indian English dialects and American English. Panamanians felt West Indians should not be hired by Americans because of their inability to speak American English. Speaking English allowed the West Indians to claim a British cultural heritage, thus helping them to entrench their cultural ideals into their communities. Also by emphasizing the West Indians' inability to speak proper Spanish, Panamanians attempted to illustrate West Indians' refusal to integrate into Panamanian society. As a result, language became another way West Indians challenged Panamanian sovereignty economically as well as culturally.

In addition to painting West Indians as unintelligent pagans that did not speak proper English, Panamanians needed to depict West Indians as vermin that were contaminating their country. The use of "prolific" in Biensanz's statement refers to

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[122] Shane White and Graham White, *Stylin': African American Expressive Culture from Its Beginnings to the Zoot Suit*¸ (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 99. This concept appears in American minstrelsy with whites donning black face to mock the black middle class with the zip coon caricature. The depiction was designed to remind Americans that African Americans were inferior because they were unable to dress in the clothes of a white society. Also, this caricature also exaggerated how affluent blacks talked by making them appear clownish instead of proper.

[123] Biensanz, "Cultural," 777

reproduction in the West Indian community. Panamanians feared that a population increase among West Indian immigrants would only further foster West Indian cultural independence. The West Indian community gained strength with each new member which equated to more economic competition for the Panamanian nationals. Panamanians' worst fear was that West Indians would greatly influence Panama politically as well as culturally, taking away what little control native Panamanians had over the country. The fear of a cultural and political takeover seemed eminent and warranted an aggressive response from Panamanians. The question of belonging is central to any immigrant's story and by the time Biesanz wrote his article, West Indians although still discriminated against, felt as if they had a legitimate claim to Panama due to the sacrifices they had made and how much corporations desired and depended on them as laborers.

During times of economic downturn, the Panamanian government attempted extreme measures to remove and disenfranchise West Indians in order to help Panamanians attain better jobs. In 1926, Panamanians viewed the West Indians as the "undesirable immigrant[s]," because they were so highly desired by international corporations and they had worked on the Canal. In 1932, the phrase "Panama for the Panamanians" arose among many other efforts to show how much West Indians were unwanted in the country. This sentiment is crucial when considering how the global economy was suffering from the Great Depression and nationalists preferred that Panamanians be hired. Finally in 1940-1944, the Panamanian constitution was amended to include a clause that prevented children born to West Indians who migrated to the

country after 1903 from obtaining Panamanian citizenship. By prohibiting these West Indians from citizenship, they were denied any political power that could affect the governing of Panama. This amendment served as a barrier to protect Panamanian culture and political power from West Indians in hopes that the West Indians would either leave the country or assimilate to Panamanian society.

The citizenship ban of West Indians was inextricably tied to not only skin color but also cultural heritage. Afro-Panamanians navigated the exacerbating racial tension in Panama due to the Panamanian heritage and Spanish blood. In addition, the caste the American occupation established consequently affected the social position of the Afro-Panamanians by allowing race to overrule their Spanish heritage. Although this amendment was overturned in 1946, a new ban on immigration of English speaking West Indians was enacted.[124]These actions by the Panamanian government pushed the West Indian community further away from Panamanians making them concentrate on preserving their native cultures instead of assimilating into Panamanian society. The political persecution endured by West Indians only further unified the West Indian community making the West Indian identity and culture more threatening to Panamanians.

By the early 1920s, the Panamanian government began to feel the pressure from its citizens to do something to either alienate the West Indians and protect Panamanian culture or force the West Indians to assimilate. The Panamanian government originally threatened to deport West Indians but instead looked into other ways to discriminate

[124] Biesanz, "Cultural," 775.

against the West Indian population such as passing laws requiring that all primary schools teach their lessons in Spanish.[125] By the time Biesanz was writing his article in 1949, the West Indians had lived on the Isthmus for about 100 years. They had established not only their unique cultural identity, but they also had erected their own private schools to teach West Indian children. These private schools expanded more during the American construction as approximately 20,000 West Indians arrived with their families; in fact, Jamaica was known for its educational excellence among the Americans thus the majority of the teachers for non-white schools[126] on the Canal Zone were Jamaican. These schools only gained major success due to the large number of West Indian immigrants who worked on the American Canal. These schools served as a constant reminder of West Indian agency in the hostile social, political, and economic climate that West Indians endured while working under racists U.S. policies. This education system served as the major contributing factor to the West Indians' educational achievements in Panama notwithstanding the severe persecution West Indian faced. According to Michael Conniff, education became "a source of community cohesion and leadership." The West Indian private schools served as a central community location for all English-speaking immigrants. The West Indian community viewed education as the

[125] Ibid., 777.

[126] Non-white schools were created by the ICC to educated black West Indians and other racial minorities. The ICC controlled schools taught courses deemed necessary for unskilled labor in order to prepare a future workforce. This Tuskegee model of education provided the ICC with constant workers who knew their position in the larger imperial system of the Canal construction.

best way to overcome any obstacle such as race and/or class and the value of education had a lasting impact on the West Indian subculture in Panama.[127]

The Panamanian government's attack on the West Indian private schools was an attack on West Indian culture as well as the community at large in efforts to protect Panamanian culture from West Indian influences. Gloria Branch recounts her parents' experience growing up as West Indians in Panama during the 1940s. She said that her parents first went to a West Indian school but were then forced to attend a school where the language of instruction was Spanish. Her account also reveals how they were determined to do their best despite the language disadvantage because of how they valued education, as was typical in the West Indian community. This is supported by Biesanz who states, "The West Indian Negro's zeal for schooling is unmatched by the lower-class Panamanians."[128] They readily took advantage of jobs that poorer Panamanians felt were benefit them. Despite their racial and cultural persecution, West Indians were fully aware that education would allow them to change their position in society.[129] The desire for a good education becomes a key pillar in the theoretical conversation about West Indian agency in Panama. Education serves as a way to prevent one's child from having to work as an unskilled laborer. Instead, a child born to a West Indian in Panama could foster dreams of practicing a skilled trade or becoming of the Colón man employed in the professional jobs--jobs that were typically restricted to white men.

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[127] Conniff, 18.

[128] Biesanz, "Cultural," 776.

[129] Ibid.

The survival and strength of the West Indian private schools functioned as early West Indian strongholds in the political and economic battleground in the Canal Zone. The West Indian threat transcended being solely about job opportunities and West Indian social mobility. These schools served as symbols of pride for the larger West Indian community and validated the West Indian claim of educational superiority to the Panamanians. Furthermore, the physical presence of these schools represented a type of cultural invasion. The strength that West Indian agency managed to garner by the late 1940s threatened to annihilate the Panamanian societal constructions built on race, Eurocentrism, and economic and political disenfranchisement. For example, Branch suggests that because American corporations and the ICC preferred English-speaking workers, Panama should have embraced being bilingual instead of solely Spanish. She attributes the resistance as "ignorance and prejudice-mostly prejudice" which was a main factor in the ostracization of the West Indians.[130] Branch explains the power that the West Indian communities achieved after years of racial discrimination and the struggle to achieve the status of the Colón man. Therefore, the 1949 governmental decree that forced West Indian assimilation by subjecting West Indians to a Spanish language education mandate removed an autonomous arena of power that West Indians maintained by having their own schools. This law proved effective since West Indians valued education due to how it enabled the oppressed to change their economic and social position in a society. As a result, in order for their children to succeed and obtain the better life of the Colón

[130] Ifeoma C. K. Nwankwo and Lucius T Outlaw Jr., "Voices from Our America," *Afro-Hispanic Review* 1 (2009): 153.

man that the first generation of West Immigrants sought to attain when they migrated, West Indian parents encouraged their children to learn Spanish.

Out of the American constructions of race and national identities, the cultural warfare of the Panamanians, and the West Indians' cultural separatism arose a newly creolized subculture. Since both the West Indians and Panamanians were interested in protecting their own culture, as a result both cultures became more defined in a post-American Canal period. When the Panamanian government mandated that all primary students be taught in Spanish, both opposing cultures were forced to inhabit a more intimate setting than before. By the end of the 1950s West Indians became partially integrated into the larger Panamanian society due to the government's use of education to weaken the strong separatism in the West Indian community. With this integration, the clear line between Panamanian and West Indian became slightly blurred which encouraged cultural transference. Gloria Branch's account shows how West Indians had to adjust for the first time since the American construction of the Canal to another country's constructions of themselves. This resulted in West Indians reevaluating their values and encouraging their children to learn Spanish in order to better survive in Panamanian society. Lord Byron Dowman, a Panamanian Calypso singer, stated that he was encouraged by his mother "to learn these people language, because you cannot live in a country that you… don't know how to speak the language, or the system."[131]

The shift from separatism fostered by West Indians is connected to Panamanians aggressively persecuting the West Indians by depicting them as culturally inferior. West

[131] Nwankwo, 157.

Indian children then grew up to represent the hybridity that came from the fusing of the Spanish, British, Afro-British, and Afro-Panamanian cultures. The cultural transformation is evident with the way those of West Indian descent switch between English and Spanish after being forced to learn Spanish in schools.[132] Furthermore, the cultural influence of Panama on West Indians' tangible cultural artifacts extended beyond language into music as well.

The complicated relationship between West Indians and Panamanians is a direct result of how American imperialism forced the two groups to compete against one another for the attention and respect of the United States. Panamanians hoped to remain America's favorite because they surrendered the Canal Zone, but it was the West Indians who brought the United States great wealth by providing the unskilled labor to build and maintain the Canal. The West Indians' sacrifices made it possible for the United States to enjoy the material benefits that trade through the Canal offered. The ambition of the West Indians set them apart from their Panamanian counterparts elevating them to a higher position in the society the ICC created. A further study would need to be done to examine how the American government of the Canal Zone interacted with the Panamanians and the West Indians concerning these issues of discrimination and cultural persecution after the completion of the Canal. The story of the West Indians that remained in Panama highlights not only the connection West Indians developed with their adopted home but also how a migrant population is willing to fight for citizenship after contributing to the country's infrastructure.

[132] Ibid., 156-157.

The larger application of this story appears in cases such as the Dominican Republic with its Haitian immigrant population. Similar to Panama, the government of the Dominican Republic discriminates against Haitians because of their more African culture. Furthermore, the Dominicans accept their Spanish heritage over their African legacy because of the constructions of race embedded in their society from the colonial period and intensified during the U.S occupation from 1916-1924. The anti-Haitianism[133] reached critical levels under the dictatorship of Rafael Leonidas Trujillo who strongly claimed that the Haitians were contaminating Dominican/Spanish culture and implemented policies to exterminate the contagion. The result was the Parsley Massacre of 1937. Although Dominicans used a more severe approach to oppressing their immigrants, both the Haitians and West Indians faced heavy persecution and resentment from their host countries. This further shows how this template of racial domination and exclusion is a creation of the United States founded on the principals of white supremacy. Since white supremacy stresses the hyper-elevation of the white race, the concept easily becomes xenophobic in countries eager to protect their status as a white nation. The Dominican Republic and Panama followed in the tradition of the United States by wanting to protect and preserve their culture from the corruption of an outside invader. More specifically, they wanted to distance themselves from associating with the idea of Africa in the early twentieth century in a hemisphere dominated by the ideals and practices of the United States. Panamanians constructed themselves using Europe as a home land in efforts to connect more closely to the United States than with the West

[133] Haitian xenophobia.

Indians. The need for this connection emerged out of the better treatment white Americans received throughout the Canal Zone and although the Panamanians are only using it figuratively, they hoped that the American employers would chose them over the black West Indians who were closer to an African identity than a white one. In other words, using a European whiteness allowed Panamanians to try to ascribe to all the notions of white privilege that are entrenched the infrastructure of American systems.

The invisible lines that are often shown on the global map may represent the political separation of individual countries but this constant cultural evolution among the descendants of West Indians in Panama is an example of how culture can transcend borders and time. Incorporating West Indian culture into the larger Panamanian culture set the precedent for *Afro-Antillanos*[134] to reconnect with their ancestral homes. Understanding the cultural transference is necessary as it provides a template for how a host nation's culture and an immigrant population's cultures can be reconciled. The extended fifty years of Panamanian resentment and persecution following the completion of the Panama Canal tried the resilience of the West Indian community in Panama and instead of the West Indian community surrendering to the racial and cultural discrimination, they formed something new that benefitted both their community as well as Panama. As a result, this episode of West Indian history serves as a prime example of how an immigrant community can participate in a hostile, xenophobic society while maintaining a sense of the communal identity and the connections to the homeland thus influencing the development of a West Indian cultural identity in Panama.

[134] *Afro-Antillanos* were Panamanian descendants of the West Indian immigrants that migrated to Panama.

Chapter V.

Conclusion

Black Hercules and the Pursuit of Freedom

Following the completion of the Canal in 1915, artist Perham Nahl displayed his poster entitled *The Thirteenth Labor of Hercules* at the World's Fair in San Francisco depicting Hercules using his strength to part the land and create the Panama Canal (See Image 1).[135] Hercules served as a false representation of the United States based on the idea that the construction project became a task that America had to complete in order to achieve its own form of immortality like that of the mythological hero. This image became the historical identity of the United States as the sole power behind the Canal's success; however, the actual herculean task of the construction was not accomplished by the visionaries that are glorified in history, but by the unsung laborers, many of whom gave up their lives to make a lasting impact on the world economy and technology. Perhaps what is more important for this study is the understanding of how the Canal became a vector for American imperialism, helping to propagate the ideology created in the Monroe Doctrine and its influence on racial identities in the Latin American region. The zeal of the still relatively young nation to establish itself as a world power led to the unequal treatment of the majority of its workforce, subjected them to a secondary status, and made it acceptable for American racism to influence practices and policies in the Canal Zone that mirrored American Jim Crow racism. This racism exacerbated the racial

[135] Perham Nahl, *The Thirteenth Labor of Hercules*, 1915 in *The Canal Builders: Making America's Empire at the Panama Canal*, Ed. Julie Greene (London: Penguin Books, 2009): n.p.

ideologies that evolved in Panamanian society. In the midst of the imperial conquest that took place, West Indians saw employment on the Panama Canal as an opportunity to fully exercise their freedom after the complete abolition of slavery in the British West Indies in 1838.[136] Coming from struggling, forgotten British colonies in the Caribbean, West Indians faced poverty and overcrowding on their island homes. The chance to participate in the Panama Canal not only allowed the migrant laborers to create a better life for themselves and their families, but also their migration drastically altered the Caribbean Basin and transmitted West Indian culture to Central America at the start of the twentieth century. West Indians were aware of the racism that existed in the United States, yet the benefits of the Canal outweighed the risks of racial inequalities. The Panama Canal was America's triumph over nature with its technological innovation, however, the history of the Panama Canal cannot be told without including the West Indians who supplied the labor.

Like many of these West Indian workers, Ezacahariah's story barely survived through familial oral history due to the trauma produced by the Panama Canal construction. With the death of Vincent Gibson in 1980, Ezacahariah's name and the particular details of his life in Panama disappeared. With his shocking death on the Canal, Cleo Gibson lost a major source of income for the family. It is possible that she worked as a domestic in the house of a white family in Panama to help provide for the family

[136] The Slavery Abolition Act of 1833 ended slavery in 1834, but former slaves were still tied to the plantation for a four year apprenticeship period.

before and after her husband's death.[137] When Cleo Gibson returned home to the family homestead in Epsom, St. Mary Jamaica, she was swindled out of the money[138] she received for her husband's death by one of his family members who agreed to help take care of the family. The story of what happened to the Gibson family after the death of Ezachariah shows the depth of how the Panama Canal construction affected the lives of the entire Caribbean basin region.

The ripple effect of the construction of the Panama Canal engendered positive and negative repercussions; however the negatives continue to be understudied in current scholarship. The death of a West Indian that worked on the Canal left his family without a steady income even if the income was lower than that of the ICC's white employees. The important point here is that immigrants regarded this low income as an improvement over their plantation livelihood and well worth the risks and American racism. Furthermore, family members that relied on remittances could wait for months to receive a letter detailing how their loved one was killed on the job with a black bordered envelope.[139] This meant that the income could cease abruptly and without any immediate explanation. Ezachariah and the aftermath his family had to endure serves as an opening to understanding how the tragedies that occurred during the construction of the Panama Canal affected the Caribbean. Although the American completion of the Canal is

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[137] Greene, 257.

[138] I currently do not have any written evidence that states that the families of West Indians/Silver Roll employees received some sort of insurance payment following the death of their loved one, yet this familial story indicates that there is a possibility of such. Another interpretation can be that the money was saved and accumulated over time.

[139] Greene, 132.

celebrated as an American triumph, the lesser told stories of what happened to the migrant workers who supplied the majority of the labor and their families are left out of the Canal discourse. A better understanding of the laborers who constructed the Canal provides a clearer picture of what life was like for the West Indians in Panama and illuminates scholars' understanding of labor migration, racial discrimination, and cultural transference that define this immigrant story. Thus, the Hercules depicted in the 1915 picture does not represent American power and ingenuity. Rather, I argue that the herculean task lay on the broad shoulders of these West Indian men who risked their lives for a nation that saw them as inferior and exploited their labor because of their black skin. Like the myth of Hercules and his twelve labors, West Indians did not turn away from a challenge; like Hercules who saw the labors as a way to atone for his sins, West Indians saw the Canal project as a viable way to achieve their goals of financial success and social mobility and to express their freedom.

Although subjugated workers were a part of the social, economic and political dynamics throughout the colonial world of European imperialism, even as early as the 16th century, all imperialisms and their dynamics are not identical. Each reflects the imperial power, the colonized people, and the particular dynamics of the colonial enterprise. In this particular place and in these particular circumstances, America's Jim Crow racism presented a new way in which an imperial power could control a population without officially colonizing the country. It is with this imperial power that American ideologies cast a shadow on Panama during this construction perpetuating racist stereotypes about West Indian workers among the Panamanian population and

intensifying the racism already present in Panama. Yet with this climate of racial and cultural intolerance, West Indians managed to gain enough respect and become the optimal employees for American corporations such as the United Fruit Company due to the work ethic they exhibited during the Canal construction and their English speaking capabilities. This created an acidic environment where the Panamanians resented West Indian laborers and waged a cultural and political campaign to force them to assimilate to Panamanian culture.

Panama proved to be an important place in the history of West Indian migration as it marks the first major country where black English speaking Caribbean men and women migrated to in significant numbers after slavery was abolished. Panama represented hope to Jamaicans who by 1881 faced the harsh realities of British colonialism and a failing sugar industry. Moreover, by 1904 when the United States started the project, the work on the Canal allowed other poor black West Indians to migrate to the American territory and therefore symbolically to migrate to the United States. With the rise of American imperialism following the Spanish American War and the American presence in Panama, I conclude that Panama figuratively represented to the West Indians, seeking to assert their freedom, a migration to the United States without officially touching the mainland. This migration held all of the promises of American empire, including an abundance of wealth and opportunity thus feeding the possibility of attaining the status of the Colón man.

Crucial to this analysis of the agency of these workers and how they created a unique West Indian identity within Panama is how the migration to Panama marked the

first stage of West Indian migration in an increasingly globalized world. The unnamed family member that stole the money from the widowed Cleo Gibson reportedly fled to another country with the money. Though his name has been lost, we can understand several factors that influenced his flight from Jamaica to, most likely, either the United States or United Kingdom. On January 14, 1907, a magnitude 6.5 earthquake struck Kingston, Jamaica decimating the major port capital city and causing an estimated £ 2 million worth of damage. The earthquake was so crippling to the largest British colony in the Caribbean that three U.S. ships were sent to the country.[140] In *The Popular Science Monthly* journal, Professor Charles W. Brown of Brown University noted how this earthquake greatly affected the infrastructure of the country's most populous city.[141]

The decision to migrate to major hubs such as New York in the early 1900s became evident as conditions in the Caribbean continued to worsen; all while the United States consolidated its power in the western hemisphere. This nameless relative of Ezachariah could have easily taken the stolen Panama money and sought to redefine his freedom and economic opportunity in the United States. The legacy of West Indian migration continued later after World War II with the Windrush Generation, the name of a British steamship that carried 492 Jamaicans to Great Britain on June 22, 1948. Both sets of West Indian groups that migrated to the United States and Great Britain faced their own trials of adapting to a host nation, but unlike their experiences in Panama, they had little room to negotiate their own identity but rather an identity was given to them.

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[140] Ralphe Hall Caine, "Saw Kingston's Days of Terror," *The New York Times*, 20 January 1907, 4-9.

[141] Charles W. Brown, "The Jamaica Earthquake," *The Popular Science* Monthly¸ 2(1907):391-403.

More so than in Panama, their race played an integral role in defining their identity. It is out of these subscribed racialized societal identities that we see Caribbean leaders such as Marcus Garvey emerge during the first two decades of the 1900s, first in Jamaica, and subsequently among the domestic African Americans in the United States. On the British side, the novel *Small Island* by Andrea Levy depicts the reality that Jamaicans and other black West Indians faced when they migrated to the motherland and were forced to live in filthy tenements while working in demeaning roles no matter their previous educational attainment in their home countries.[142] The West Indian immigrant experience in Panama served as a type of foreshadowing of how West Indians not only faced demonization and mistreatment because of their immigrant status, but also for their skin color. Nonetheless, the West Indian experience in Panama sets the precedent for how West Indian agency would adapt and grow to meet the new challenges that each new country presented to the community.

While the Panama Canal benefitted the United States and enabled the country to assert its dominance as a rising global power and caused the West Indian community both in Panama and on the Caribbean islands a significant amount of instability, West Indian agency in Panama allowed for the emergence of a hybrid Panamanian-West Indian culture. When West Indians migrated to Panama they, like all immigrants, served as vectors of cultural identity, bringing with them their food, music, and speech to the Isthmus of Panama. All these aspects of West Indian cultural identity can be seen in Panama today but it is the musical expressions and speech that serve as major markers of

[142] Andrea Levy, *Small Island* (New York, NY: Picador, 2004).

the impact West Indians had in Panama. Carla Guerrón-Montero writes that calypso music has become integral in defining Panamanian culture in recent history as it is used in tourism.[143] Her research shows how the integration of cultures is possible, but she does not answer questions concerning how the cultural transference occurred. Instead she creates the false illusion that both groups, West Indians and Panamanians, coexisted peacefully when the opposite is true. Also, her research explores how these descendants of the first West Indian immigrants retain an elitism exhibited by their ancestors. This elitism emerges because the West Indians still feel the need to protect their heritage although their hybrid culture has Panamanian cultural markers in addition to the West Indian foundation. Lastly, with the increased globalization of the world, these *Afro-Antillanos*, feel the need to reconnect with their Caribbean homelands constantly drawing from the current musical forms in countries such as Jamaica and Trinidad to create Spanish Reggae and Panamanian Calypso. *Afro-Antillanos* also demonstrate how strong the cultural ties are between the West Indies and Panama with the adoption of these newer forms of music developed in their cultural birthplaces as well as unique cultural expressions such as with reggae and Rastafarianism.[144]

Musical expressions played a significant role in West Indian community on the Isthmus of Panama since West Indians' initial immigration during the construction of the Canal. The work songs West Indians brought from the home islands helped to form the foundation for the musical tradition that continued throughout the 20th century. During

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[143] Carla Guerrón-Montero, "Can't Beat Me Own Drum in Me Own Native Land: Calypso Music and Tourism in the Panamanian Atlantic Coast," *Anthropological Quarterly* 4 (2006): 637.

[144] Ibid., 652.

the Canal construction the songs adapted to the new life in Panama as West Indians began to reflect on everyday life on the Canal including themes of murder, family, war, work, and love.[145] With the song 1971 "Colón Colón" by famed Panamanian Calypso singer Lord Cobra, the fusion of the two cultures is clearer.[146] The influence of West Indian musical styles is present with the manner that Lord Cobra is singing about his hometown of Colón along with the concentration on the reality of life similar to the work songs from the construction period. In addition, the influence of Trinidadian calypso and Jamaican *mento* is also present in the instrumentation of the song with the use of acoustic guitars and various percussion instruments. The piece shows the prevalence of code-switching by the late 1960s into the 1970s in the West Indian community as Lord Cobra tells the story of Colón in both English and Spanish. The usage of these musical styles demonstrates how West Indians contributed to Panamanian culture by not assimilating to the larger Panamanian society as citizens but continued to maintain their West Indian identity although they were viewed as an immigrant invader. Furthermore, the ability to code-switch with relative ease by the 1960s shows how the English spoken by the West Indians and the Spanish by the Panamanians had managed to be integrated into a specific sub group of the larger Panamanian society. This end product of nearly half a century of cultural struggle is evidence that cultures are constantly emerging and evolving even in

[145] Louise Cramer, "Songs of West Indian Negroes in the Canal Zone," *California Folklore Quarterly* 3 (1946): 243-272.

[146] Lord Cobra, "Colón Colón." *Panama! 3: Calypso Panameño, Guajira Jazz & Cumbia Tipica on the Isthmus 1960-75*, CD, 2009.

hostile environments. These songs embody the humanness that emerges in the midst of inhumanity as cultural transference occurs whether people want it or not. [147]

Moreover, this song by Lord Cobra raises the question of how cultural memory is preserved in the descendants of an immigrant population. The song not only uses musical styles that arrived with the original West Indian immigrants to Panama, but it also incorporates topics of social justice and the acceptance of one's identity that is found during the same time in Reggae music. The song calls for people to "Come back to Colón¨ in both English and Spanish. Colón has a historical significance for the descendants of the West Indian immigrants as the port city is where West Indians disembarked after arriving to Panama to work on the Canal. The city was also the hometown to Lord Cobra and has a large *Afro-Antillano* population thus adding to the centrality it played in defining *Afro-Antillano* identity in the latter half of the twentieth century. Lord Cobra asserts a power here by claiming the city as a homeland of the West Indian identity in Panama where his ancestors suffered marginalization and discrimination from the French, Americans, and the native Panamanians. Colón represents not only the *Afro-Antillano* identity but it also connects to the larger West Indian experience in Panama particularly concerning the migration to the country. "Colón Colón," despite its haunting musical style, serves as a triumphant song that celebrates the cultural memory of West Indian ambition and not the Silver worker and all the negative experiences associated with the discrimination West Indians faced in Panama.

[147] This inter mingling of cultures appears in the United States in the South as black and whites share a distinct Southern culture as is evident not only with speech, but also with music and food.

However, the most powerful element of this song is not just the migration but the reemergence of the Colón man that appeared under the French construction. The Colón man's namesake further exemplifies the importance the entrance port city to the Caribbean played in the West Indian life not only in Panama but in the entire Caribbean basin. This cultural image showed West Indians that sought to migrate to Panama the treasure that awaited their arrival. Although this image did not account for the struggles that lay ahead of the West Indian migrants, it proves the power of West Indian agency regardless of the global imperial dynamics that took place by 1914. The Colón man is the symbolic manifestation of the dreams and ambition of the West Indian immigrant worker who made Panama his home. Likewise, the black Hercules is the symbolic representation of the burden of discrimination that West Indians had to endure in order to achieve the dreams and become the fully realized Colón man. Thus, the Colón man is Hercules, as both represent the West Indians' tenacity and agency to not only fully experience their freedom, but also the audacity to carve out a stronghold in a country that embodied the broken promises and the evils that imperialism created for the marginalized workforce.

In the 100 years since the completion of the Panama Canal, West Indians have continued to migrate and serve in various occupations around the world continuing the migration culture that has its roots in the construction of the Panama Canal. Their success and ability to move up the social ladder in countries such as the United States, Canada, and Great Britain is largely attributed to the thousands of nameless victims of the early era of imperialism and migration that controlled life in the Caribbean basin. By 1938, a

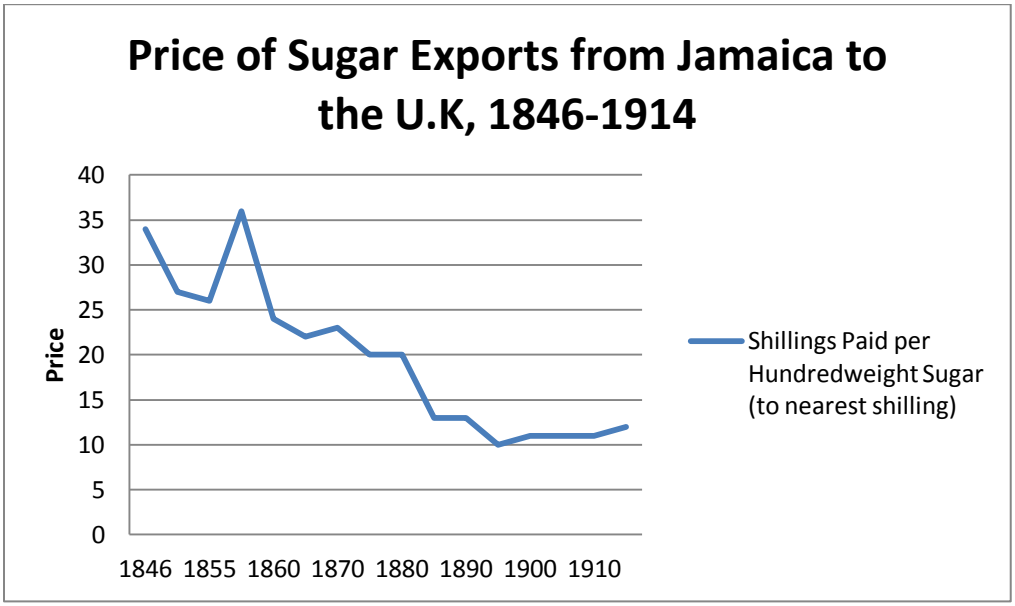
hundred years after the apprenticeship period in the British Caribbean, West Indians participated in major global events such as World War I and the construction of the Panama Canal yet they were deemed to be second class citizens when compared to white men and women in these important world events.

Though they may not have left many written documents and physical records of their impact on our modern society, these invisible West Indians played an essential role in the theater of the twentieth century. The records that do exist from the empires that exploited these workers answer many of the questions I had concerning the life of my great-grandfather: "What caused a black Jamaican to migrate to Panama to work on the Canal in the early 1900s and what was his life like while there?" Furthermore, these records also show how West Indians did not meekly allow world events to shape their experiences and opportunities, but through their own agency they asserted quietly and vocally how they were not invisible but a people with a unique cultural identity. Though these key questions are answered in my research, new questions include, "How did West Indians personally feel during these major shifts in the Western hemisphere?" Further research is necessary to truly understand the push and pull factors that caused migration in the West Indian community following emancipation. Also, the story of the creation of a West Indian communal identity in Panama begs the question, "Did West Indians get what they wanted when they migrated?" Nonetheless, the available stories about these men show how the migration to Panama was not a quest to become historical figures and change the global landscape, but to exercise and pursue their freedom no matter what obstacle they faced. The agency and ambition of these West Indian workers redefined

their identity in the midst of an increasingly globalized world. By focusing on the personal aspects of these men who built the Canal we are able to critically analyze an active manifestation of the agency that emerges in response to the push and pull factors that encourage migration. Finally, by settling in Panama and becoming residents instead of remaining migrant laborers, West Indians and their descendants managed to attain the goal of the Colón man by being able to achieve more social mobility in Panama than their counterparts that remained on their ancestral home islands did by the mid twentieth century. Hence, West Indian agency completed its final stage of the evolution as West Indians who evolved from being seen as slaves, to migrant laborers, to finally residents with a unique cultural heritage and ambition as *Afro-Antillanos.*

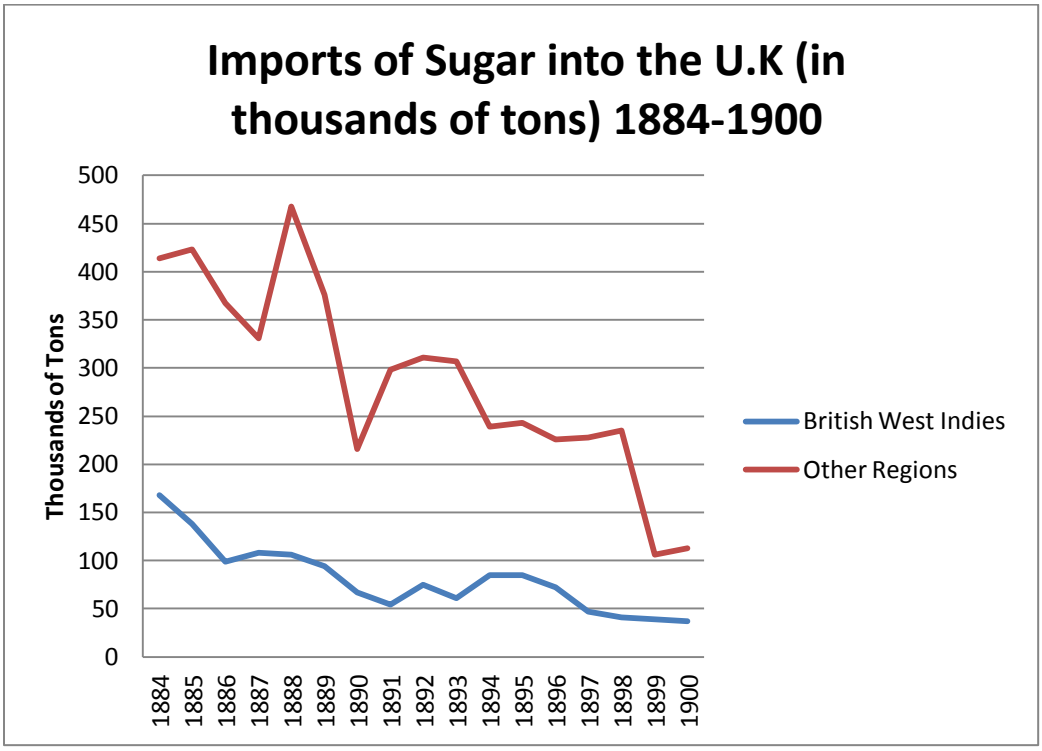
Illustrations

Graph 1



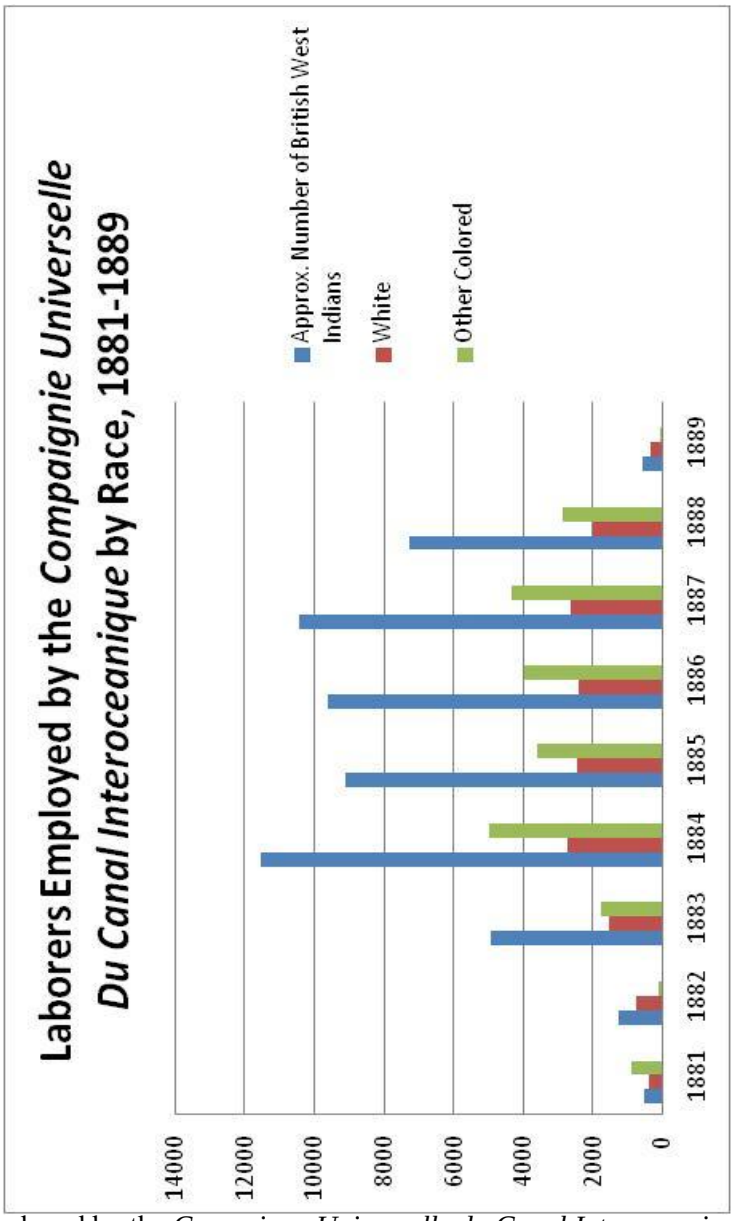
"Price of Sugar Exports from Jamaica to the United Kingdom, 1846-1914," in *The Silver Men: West Indian Labour Migration to Panama, 1850-1914*, Ed. Velma Newton (Mona, Kingston 7, Jamaica: Institute of Social and Economic Research, 1984), 9.

Graph 2



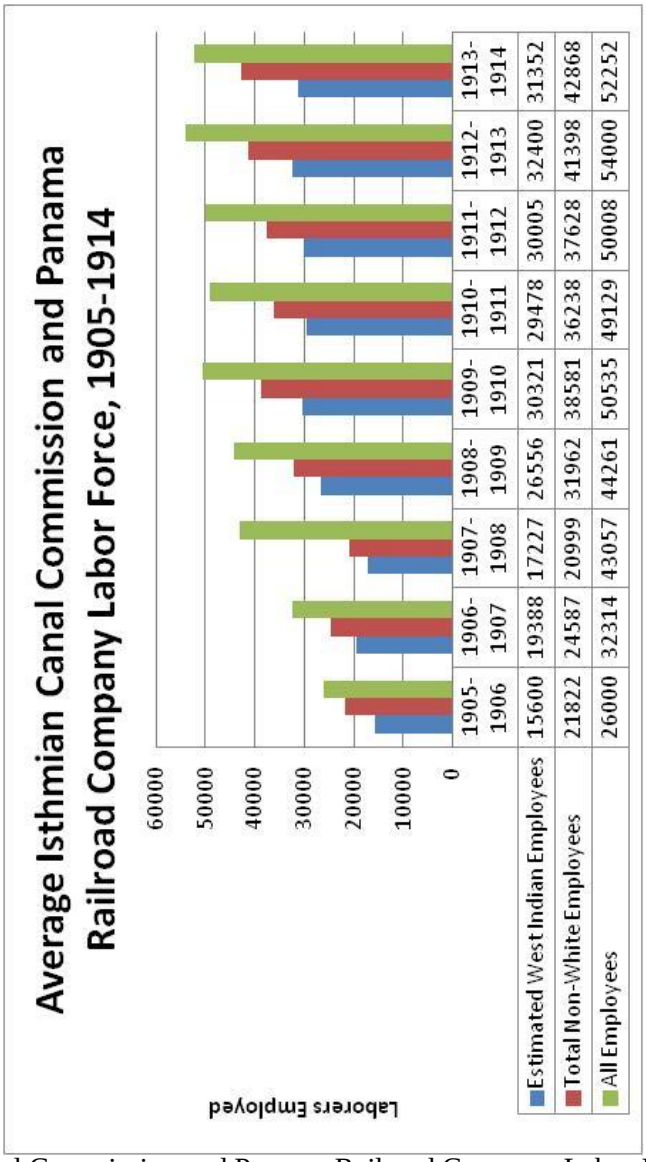
"British West Indian Sugar Exports and United Kingdom Sugar Imports, 1884-1900," in *The Silver Men: West Indian Labour Migration to Panama, 1850-1914*, Ed. Velma Newton(Mona, Kingston 7, Jamaica: Institute of Social and Economic Research, 1984), 10.

Graph 3



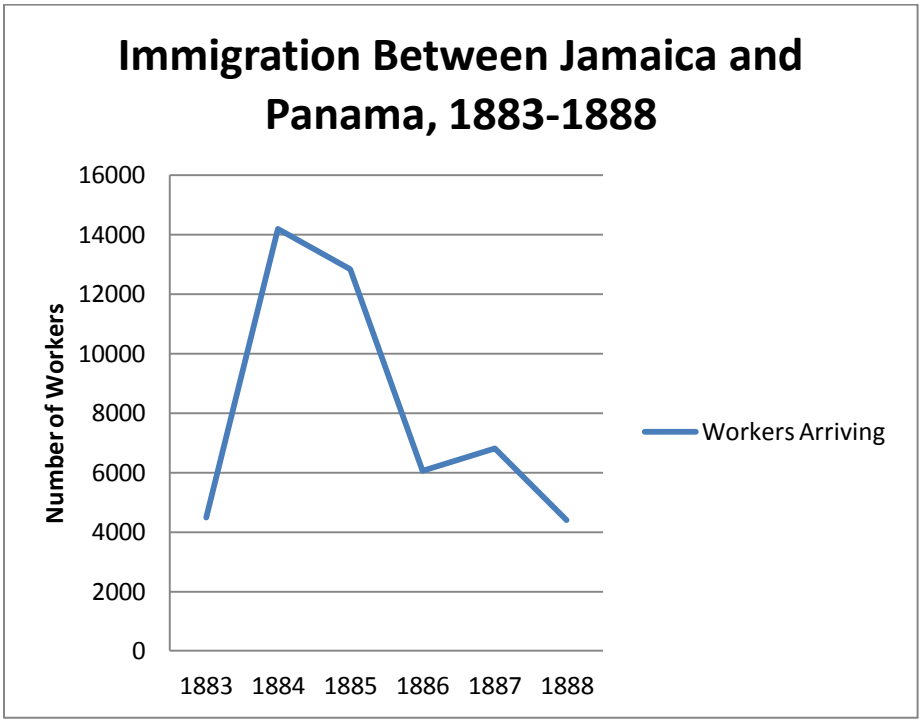
"Labour Force Employed by the *Compaigne Universelle du Canal Interoceanique* in October of Each Year, 1881-1889," in *The Silver Men: West Indian Labour Migration to Panama, 1850-1914*, Ed. Velma Newton (Mona, Kingston 7, Jamaica: Institute of Social and Economic Research, 1984), 44.

Graph 4



"Average Isthmian Canal Commission and Panama Railroad Company Labor Force, 1905-1914 ," in *The Silver Men: West Indian Labour Migration to Panama, 1850-1914*¸Ed. Velma Newton (Mona, Kingston 7, Jamaica: Institute of Social and Economic Research, 1984), 46.

Graph 5



"Statistics of Migration Between Jamaica and Panama," in *The Silver Men: West Indian Labour Migration to Panama, 1850-1914,* Ed. Velma Newton (Mona, Kingston 7, Jamaica: Institute of Social and Economic Research, 1984), 92.

Image 1

"Zoners" forced to live in box-cars are furnished all the comforts of home

Harry A. Franck, *Things as they are in Panama* (London: The Century Company, 1913), 238.

Image 2

tue wed thur fri

Agency for the Panama Canal Company,
Kingston, August 4, 1885.

The fine New First Class Screw Steamership

AMICITIA

Will sail for Colon on

FRIDAY, THE 7TH AUGUST,

at 12 (noon) promptly, taking freight and passengers.

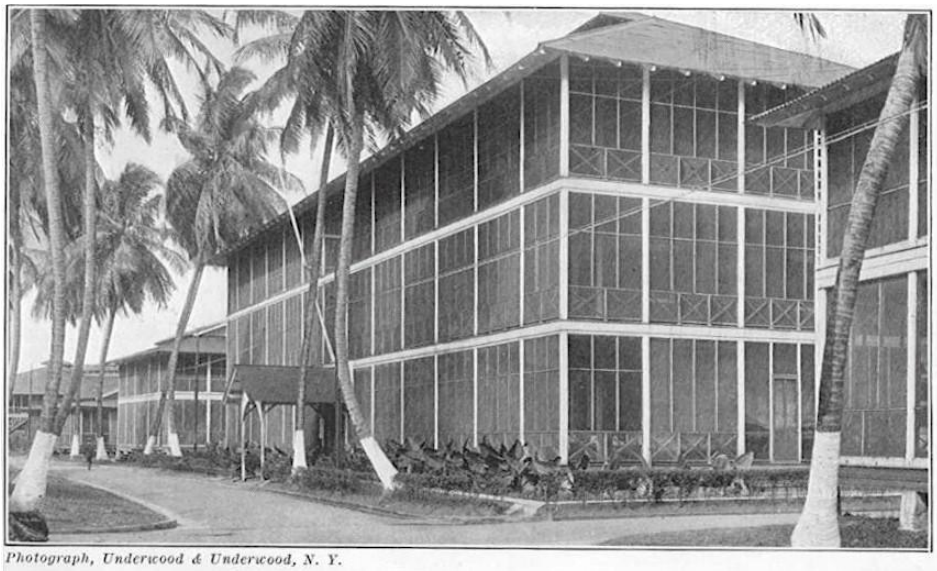
This vessel has been brought out specially fitted up for the comfort and convenience of third class passengers, having large, clean, airy, and well ventilated 'tween decks, and waterproof awnings the whole length of the vessel.

Passengers are unrestricted in their supply of food and water.

For freight or passage, apply to
CHARLES GADPAILLE,
14, Port Royal Street.

"Will Sail for Colon," *Daily Gleaner*, August 6, 1885.

Image 3

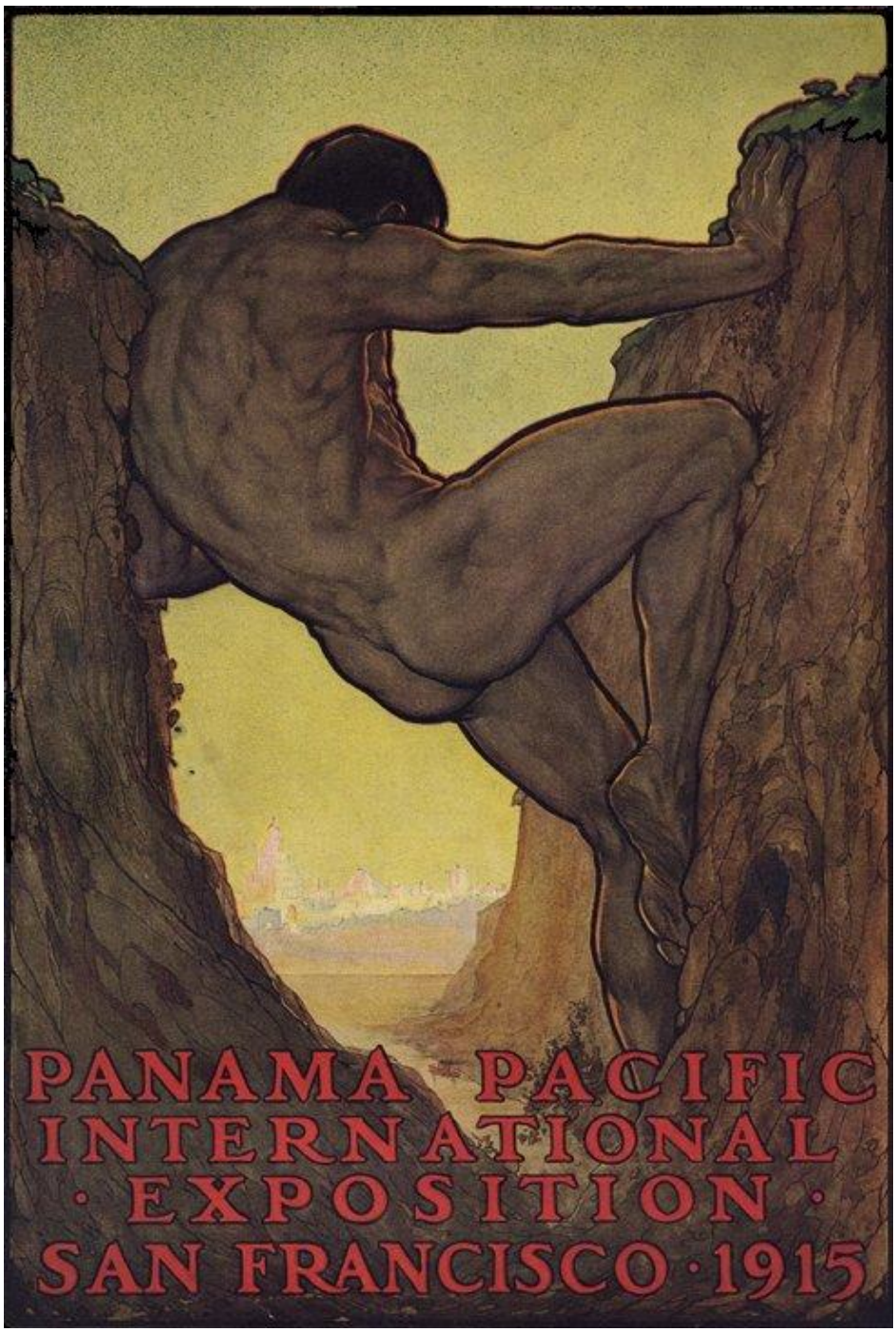


Photograph, Underwood & Underwood, N. Y.

HOTEL AND QUARTERS FOR AMERICAN EMPLOYEES.

William Scott, "Hotel and Quarters for American Employees," *The Americans in Panama* (New York: The Statler Publishing Company, 1913) , n.p.

Image 4



Perham Nahl, *The Thirteenth Labor of Hercules*, 1915 in *The Canal Builders: Making America's Empire at the Panama Canal*, Ed. Julie Greene (London: Penguin Books, 2009): n.p.

Image 5

"Typical Housing Provided by ICC for West Indians." in *The Canal Builders: Making America's Empire at the Panama Canal*, Ed. Julie Greene (London: Penguin Books, 2009): 174-175.

In this picture an overcrowded porch is packed with various wash basins and wet clothes hanging to dry. The caption for the pictures states that the West Indians, unlike the Gold roll employees, lived in congested space and lacked adequate drainage to remove standing water as breeding grounds for mosquitoes that carried malaria and yellow fever.

Image 6

"Nuevo Kingston," a Negro tenement of Empire. Each sheet-iron cooking-place on the veranda rail represents a family

Harry A. Franck, *Things as they are in Panama* (London: The Century Company, 1913), 59.

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