

Book review

C. Guerrón Montero, *From Temporary Migrants to Permanent Attractions: Tourism, Cultural Heritage, and Afro-Antillean Identities in Panama* (University of Alabama Press, Tuscaloosa, USA 2020) 224 pp.

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As the narrow bridge between the Americas, Panama was the first area Spain colonized on the continent – making it a transit route for goods and humans since the 16th century. Despite various stages of in-migration to Panama from all over the world, and multiple changes in terms of foreign control over land and other resources, Panama’s political and economic elite have long sought to maintain a cohesive national identity as an independent Latin American nation with Spanish ancestry. This has ensured that Mestizos (those with at least some Spanish ancestry) remain culturally and politically dominant, while ‘others’ have been pressured to assimilate.

Panamanian history, however, cannot be divorced from the African diaspora. Waves of African descendants traveled to the isthmus shortly after initial European contact, and then during construction of the trans-isthmian railroad and both iterations of the canal’s construction (French and US). After the canal’s completion, many stayed to work in the plantation economy, and their descendants remain. Despite this reality, there has been very little social science or ethnographic research dedicated to understanding the lived experiences and/or lifeworld interpretations of contemporary Panamanians who can trace their ancestral roots to Africa.

From Temporary Migrants to Permanent Attractions: Tourism, Cultural Heritage, and Afro-Antillean Identities in Panama is the result of nearly two decades of work that Carla Guerrón Montero has dedicated to understanding how Afro-Antilleans have experienced and continue to navigate cultural, racial, and ethnic tensions in Panama over time. Guerrón Montero writes this narrative in a way that does not diminish the phases of aggressive subjugation experienced by African descendants in Panama. Her work, however, also lends weight to their resilience and ability to utilize the modern thrust to construct a Panamanian multiculturalism for touristic consumption, to drive autonomy over articulating their culture, and to carve out social, economic, and political power. This work is multi-disciplinary and will appeal to scholars and students in many fields. Those studying tourism, place branding, identity, migration, and the African diaspora, as well as anyone focusing geographically on the Latin American and Caribbean region, will find this work especially engaging.

The main theoretical grounding of this book lies within mobility studies. Most of the academic work in this space focuses on tourists’ and lifestyle migrants’ desire to travel and relocate to different places around the world as part of an effort to take

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advantage of their relative wealth and detach from geographical locations and discourses of territoriality. This book, however, focuses on the Afro-Antilleans' quest to instead affirm their ties to the Panamanian nation-state while also promoting their cosmopolitan transitional ties to a larger region. It runs counter to many critical tourism studies that suggest there is a top-down form of global hegemony imposed upon receiving communities to conform. Instead, it illuminates how these forces have been appropriated to articulate Afro-Antillean identity and carve out a unique space in the discourse of Panamanian identity. This book ventures to elucidate what it means to be black in Panama today.

In the first chapter, Guerrón Montero borrows a metaphor from Armando Fortune, who poked holes in the platitude that Panama represents a cultural melting pot, and suggested instead that it is more like *sancocho* – a traditional soup where the ingredients do not blend together, but instead the carrots, corn cobs, tubers, and other ingredients remain discrete, like the socio-cultural entities in the country. This chapter demonstrates the various attempts made at the national level to 'whiten,' 'civilize,' and/or 'latinize' Afro-Antilleans with programs as overt as denying residency and citizenship to African migrants who did not have command of Spanish or knowledge of the 'proper' discourse of the country's history.

In the second chapter, titled 'Panama's Temporary Migrants,' an important cultural distinction was made between Afro-Antilleans and Afro-Colonials in Panamanian culture. By the late 19th century (when Afro-Antilleans first came to build the French canal), Afro-Colonials – descendants of slaves brought to the country between the 16th and mid-19th century – were already established and integrated within Panamanian society as Spanish-speaking Catholics. Afro-Colonials, like the rest of the Spanish Mestizo population in Panama, saw and treated English- and Patois-speaking Afro-Antilleans as an inferior class. To dominant groups, Afro-Antilleans were seen simply as a labor force to be disposed of or repatriated to their island nations after being exploited for their labor. Despite the structural racism imposed upon the Afro-Antillean population (which came in many forms, including Jim Crow segregation and pay differentials in the Canal Zone), many eventually moved to Bocas del Toro to work on banana and cacao plantations, and continued to forge a unique identity within Panamanian culture.

In Chapter 3, the book moves to discuss the effort made to brand Panama as 'More than a Canal.' When the US ceded control of the canal to the Panamanian authorities in 1999, the central government turned to tourism and attracting wealthy migrants as an economic policy. Seeing the international tourism arrivals flooding into Costa Rica, its neighbor to the north, Panama established a plan to promote visitation to what they continue to attempt to brand as their unique multicultural democracy. Chapter 4 discusses how much of tourism visitation is centered on Bocas del Toro. Guerrón Montero showcases this as ironic, considering the region's historic role as an economic and cultural backwater in the country, which has suffered under-investment and neglect since the United Fruit Company left the archipelago in the 1920s. This chapter leans on neoliberal discourse to strongly assert that, 'despite the multiculturalist narratives, tourism is perceived by the national authorities as a way to tame the presumed "backward" archipelago composed of indigenous peoples and black populations with "backward" pasts' (p. 92). The policy's priority is therefore to ensure that they are 'safe to tour,' rather than ensuring these populations have agency and opportunities to benefit from the tourism industry.

In Chapter 5, 'Afro-Antilleanness Represented,' the book moves to discuss two key examples of museums in Panama City (the Afro-Antillean Museum and the

Panama Canal Museum) that represent two persistent inadequacies associated with the effort to celebrate cultural diversity in the country. The Afro-Antillean Museum, Guerrón Montero argues, represents a fossilized version of the group's history, without enlivening a contemporary context or discussion, while the Canal Museum is criticized for perpetuating myths of Zonian social superiority and technological triumphalism over nature. In short, the black experience is mentioned, but remains subordinate, fossilized, and without the necessary and contemporary nuance required for understanding actual lived experiences.

In Chapter 6, the title of the book becomes apparent when tourism growth in Bocas del Toro is discussed as a vehicle for Afro-Antilleans to forge a solidified space within a broadening Panamanian identity. Guerrón Montero (p. 109) says:

Tourism allowed a population that had been considered outside the confines of the construction of the nation-state to become an important component in Panama's master narratives of ethnic diversity and geopolitical importance ... in the current tourism climate, Afro-Antilleans' historic reputation has been transformed from temporary migrants to permanent attractions.

As tourists seek out authenticity, in the process of capitalizing on 'authentic' Bocas, Afro-Antilleans also found an external source of value, which has facilitated revival and self-actualization through cultural articulations manifested through Afro-Caribbean cuisine, music, and demonstrations.

In the conclusion, however, it is re-articulated that, while tourism provides an opportunity for Afro-Antilleans to assert their cultural value and position, 'the official multiculturalism in the tourism era has not contributed to changes in the profound unequal distribution of resources based on class, race and ethnicity that have prevailed in Panama' (p. 151). As such, this book lays important foundations for contemporary scholars operating in Bocas del Toro, like myself, to continue to convey an understanding of this complicated legacy, especially in the context of accelerated tourism growth and second home purchasing that has taken place during this stage of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The question posed thereby is: Are Afro-Antilleans finding new avenues for articulating their permanent space in Panamanian culture and adequately benefiting from the tourism industry, or is this new phase of tourism growth following old patterns associated with squeezing and diminishing their contemporary role in the evolving Panamanian society? While this book is written to reflect ongoing issues with Afro-Antillean identity and power in the Panamanian context, the questions it brings to the fore and its findings can truly enliven our understanding and inform debate related to any country where marginalized groups and migrants vie for recognition as well as social, political, and economic power.