

Book Review

Alexander Craft, Renée. *When the Devil Knocks: The Congo Tradition and the Politics of Blackness in Twentieth-Century Panama*. Columbus: The Ohio State UP, 2015.

When the Devil Knocks provides an insightful view into the Congo tradition (s) that coincides with Carnival in Portobelo, Panama and surrounding Atlantic-based Afro-Colonial Panamanian communities. Reminiscent of the Peruvian ethnography *Yo soy negro* due to its Afro-diasporic focus, Renée Alexander Craft demonstrates an exhaustive maneuvering of knowledge pertaining to a nuanced understanding of blackness in contemporary Panama. Two distinct Afro-descendant groups are alluded to: Afro-Colonials, who established palenques during Spanish colonization and are the focal point of the book in large part to the analysis of the Congo tradition and Afro-Antilleans, blacks who migrated during the 19th century due to the railroad industry and later in the 20th century for the construction of the Panama Canal. Utilizing a multi-dimensional theoretical framework that includes Victor Turner's concept of *communitas* and Raymond William's postulations of official and practical consciousness, the book offers a meticulously intimate perspective for the casual reader and broad multi-leveled theorization for the academic reader. Although not the only character that comprises the "Congo" tradition in Portobelo, the Devil character is featured extensively throughout the book with a focus on the most renowned "Major Devil" in Panama- Celedonio Molinar Ávila. Performativity is the predominant element in analyzing the cast of "Congo" characters in *When the Devil Knocks* and the author distinguishes between local communal understandings of the Congo tradition and "like-local" performances that are intended for tourists.

Chapter 1 provides an in-depth explanation of the complexity of the Afro-descendant in contemporary Panama. There are two distinct groups of blacks in Panama- the Afro-Colonials and the

Afro-Antilleans (West Indians). The author explains that a disjuncture occurred between Afro-Antilleans and Afro-Colonials due to national perceptions that the first group assimilated in Panamanian society because of the linkage to *cimarrón* communities dating back to the early 17th century. Conversely, the Afro-Antilleans were perceived as immigrants and "outsiders" that worked as laborers on the Panama Canal. Moreover, "black" transformed into a signifier meaning "West Indian." Nevertheless, the 1964 Flag Riots and the 1989 U.S. invasion of Panama created a strong sense of *communitas* between the two Afro-descendant groups, eventually permitting visibility and opportunity to establish unique ethno-racial identities.

Chapter 2 utilizes Raymond Williams' postulations of official consciousness and practical consciousness pertaining to the Congo community's cultural and ceremonial performances. The contextualization of "official" consciousness in the Congo community is defined as a historically based narrative by primarily older generations (orality accounts) that seeks to orchestrate uniformity and continuity of Congo performance. During Carnival season, tourists and spectators outside of the Congo tradition(s) in particular witness an interpretative mode of performativity based on a more rigid conformity to tradition; in this regard, the "official consciousness" optic standardizes a scripted performance that aligns with a more conservative ritual performance. By contrast, practical consciousness gravitates towards a more ambiguous and nuanced series of Carnival performances designed specifically for the Portobelo community. For example, the polychromic nature of a practical consciousness approach signifies that Carnival does not commence on a specific day, but is an approximation. Thus, 20th and 21st century addendums such as the Devil's baptism (not related

to the historical narrative) reflect the adaptability of the practical consciousness mode in a modern context while it retains the Congo's historical trajectory.

Highlighting the Devil character in Congo tradition(s), Alexander Craft demonstrates the influence of "circum-local" dynamics considering a Black diasporic context in Chapter 3. The author postulates that Congo performativity varies due to migration within local environs and correlates the phenomenon to Paul Gilroy's notion of the "Black Atlantic". "Micro-migrations" affect each individual differently as each spatial boundary (city, district, province) has a unique set of local culture(s). One provided significant example is the influence of Celedonio Molina Ávila who is featured in the chapter. The "circum-local" example that the author utilizes describes how Celedonio transformed the locality of Portobelo, Panama, producing the Major Devil character, which lacked precedence in the town previously. Celedonio transformed the Devil character by implementing the baptism component, solidifying his uniqueness to this particular community and expanding on the "practical consciousness" premise in Chapter 2. Subsequently after Celedonio's retirement, Carlos Chavarría, Celedonio's mentee, shares his personal account of playing the Major Devil and how the "passing of the torch" occurred. The chapter concludes with a commentary about El Festival de los Diablos y Congos, another manifestation of *communitas* that expands on the "circum-local" differences of Congo interpretations within Panamanian communities especially along the Caribbean coast.

Chapter 4 envisions an approach that distinguishes "local" and "like-local" Congo performances. "Local" performances are intended to entertain the Portobelo community during Carnival season whereas "like-local" connotes a commodification of Congo ritualistic performance and is directed towards foreigners and tourists. "Like-local" Congo presentations require an external element (a group outside of the community) because it comprises the community's "double consciousness." Utilizing Du Bois' theorization, the author juxtaposes the community's self-perception and the outside world's perception towards the local Congo practitioners. Furthermore, the chapter explains how and why the community

utilizes the outside group's misconceptions and stereotyping against them in order to invert power relations historically and contemporarily. The parodying of colonization plays a vital role in the community's "game" of revealing and withholding cultural elements in the prepackaged "like-local" performances. Regarding the gendering of performativity, the author employs Peter Wilson's respectability/ model by defining respectability as feminine and reputation as masculine, which ironically is determined by Eurocentric ideals.

Chapter 5 examines the performative mode of Congo dance traditions as an active ritualistic embodiment of the Portobelo Carnival's most renowned characters such as Devil, King and Queen. The author decides to make the transition from researcher to performer, contextualizing the "Devil" trope in its historical context. Touching on the symbolism of the subversive level of rituality in Congo tradition, Alexander Craft collaborates with the local Portobelo community to bring back the social consciousness of the *cimarrón* tradition. Via a juxtaposition of the author's own positionality as a U.S. Southern black female and the local Congo practitioners, she experiences the nuancing of corporeal movement as it pertains to performing Congo dance tradition. The chapter concludes with the realization of the museo Congo exhibit as a way of providing an organic portrayal of Congo visual art and *cimarrón* legacy. Additionally, performativity underscores the importance of criticizing and parodying Spanish colonization and enslavement from the perspective of the *cimarrón*.

When the Devil Knocks utilizes eclectic approaches considering gender, race, sexuality, diasporic politics, and theatre performativity in disseminating meaning and interpretation of the Congo tradition(s) from the actors' standpoint (Afro-Colonial community in Portobelo) and the positionality of the witnesses (the author herself and the tourists). Chapters two, three and four are representative of the book's premise; however, Chapter one distinguishes between two Afro-descendant populations in Panama, but attempts to analyze Afro-Colonial and Afro-Antillean relationships and histories over a roughly 150-year period. The latter part of the book's title is somewhat misleading because *When the Devil Knocks* is almost entirely dedicated to Congo tradition during Carnival and the representations of the Devil character and

its importance to Portobelo and other Afro-Colonial communities in Panama. Chapter five involves Alexander Craft's personal theatrical interpretation of Congo based on her first-hand witnessing of Congo customs. Pertaining to the specificity of Congo tradition(s) and the renditions of the Devil in particular, chapters one and five can be viewed as separate entities in comparison to the rest of the book. *When the Devil Knocks: The Congo Tradition and the Politics of Blackness in Twentieth Century Panama* is a recommended read for Latin Americanists and Alexander Craft successfully fulfills a void in the limited scholarship as it relates to Afro-Panamanian blackness and interconnections between the African diaspora in the Americas.

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