The place of people of African descent in the history of Central America is often overlooked by academics. There is a general understanding that thousands of West Indians built the Panama Canal and that Belize was a little piece of the British Empire on the mainland, but there are many small towns along the Caribbean coast of Central America where the majority of the population is made up of people of African descent. There are thousands of people in the region whose ancestors came from Africa, not Europe and not the Americas, and even more people are of mixed African descent. Some arrived as slaves with the earliest Spanish settlers and others followed until emancipation in the early twentieth century. These people were concentrated in rural areas like the cacao plantations of Costa Rica. They were runaway or shipwrecked slaves, and worked transporting goods from one coast to the other, before the construction of the Panama Railroad. Later, between 1850 and 1950, hundreds of thousands of West Indians ventured to and through Central America in search of work and other opportunities.

Whenever or however they arrived, people of African descent in Central America lived on the margins, both geographically and socially. They established roots, formed communities, and created, especially along the Caribbean coast between the Yucatan peninsula and the Darien Gap, a belt of villages and towns that were culturally and conceptually beyond the grasp of the mainstream societies of the region. Some groups, like the Garifuna of Honduras or the Creoles of Nicaragua, are well known to researchers. Yet, there were many others who lived a less isolated existence side-by-
side with Hispanics in coastal centers like Limón, Puerto Barrios, Managua, Tegucigalpa or San José, where their African heritage and identity was either overlooked or consciously ignored. During the colonial period miscegenation provided some with an entry into mainstream society, but most lived lives that were apart. The painful birthing process of independence from Spain did not create many opportunities for people of African descent in Central America, who continued to live in the shadows of the emerging nation states. Then, in the later half of the nineteenth century, with the mass migration of workers from across the Caribbean region, the place of people of African descent changed in Central America.

Initially, foreign workers were welcomed as a means of attracting foreign investment and developing new industries without putting pressure on the existing labor supply. They built the Panama Canal and several railroads, worked in mines, and established plantations along the tropical lowlands of the Caribbean coast. Shortly after men began arriving, their families followed and new communities were established. Despite their sacrifices and their many contributions to the prosperity of Central America, governments and some pressure groups in the region soon began to fear the growing presence of these particular foreigners. Familiarity bred contempt and as the isolated Caribbean coast was opened up for investment, Central Americans came face to face with the challenge of the encroachment of Caribbean migrants on the mainland.

Two new books, one by Frederick Douglass Opie and the other by Glenn A. Chambers, offer original and valuable insights into the lesser known histories of labor migration to the Caribbean coast of Central America. Black Labor Migration in Caribbean Guatemala and Race, Nation, and West Indian Immigration to Honduras are perfect companions for the study of two of the most obscure and least studied West Indian communities in Central America. They join the existing literature on West Indians in Central America, which is mainly focused on Costa Rica and Panama, and offer a similar, but different perspective on the experience of Caribbean migrants to the region. They are, therefore, welcome and innovative additions to the study of immigration and settlement along Central America’s Caribbean coast and provide students of the African Diaspora with new reference points.

Frederick Opie begins by setting the historical and geographical stage for Africans in Guatemala. His emphasis is on the fact that the presence of Africans dates well back into the Spanish colonial period and that the arrival in the 1880s of laborers from Caribbean and U.S. ports was a continuation of an historic trend. He then concentrates on the rapid increase of West Indian migration, which resulted in foreign-born workers of African descent becoming the largest segment of the workforce on Guatemala’s Caribbean coast prior to the Great Depression. His book documents the dangers and challenges that greeted people when they arrived in a country with an entrenched racial hierarchy where political turmoil was the rule and where justice was a matter
of power relationships. A major factor in both the attraction of workers and the reaction against them was the role of the International Railroad of Central America, the United Fruit Company, and other foreign-owned corporations. Once Opie establishes a foundation, he looks at the rise of radicalism among workers in response to their concerns over wages and working conditions and the general climate of racism that prevailed. Garveyism and labor radicalism come together in a series of strikes, culminating in 1923 with the arrest and deportation of the principal agitators, all of whom were of African descent.

Similarly, Glenn Chambers examines the period of heightened Caribbean immigration to Honduras between the early development of banana plantations along the north coast in the last decade of the nineteenth century and the backlash against foreigners that resulted in the deportation of West Indians in the 1930s. The story of the West Indian experience in Honduras is told in a way that allows Chambers to focus on the government’s reaction to the perceived threat posed by Caribbean sojourners. Honduras was one of the first countries to begin cracking down on West Indian immigrants, imposing a total ban several years before the neighboring republics did so. The reasons for the Honduran government’s more stringent attitude toward immigrant labor was the result of a combination of its significantly weaker national economy and the stronger regional economy of its Caribbean lowland region. Unlike Costa Rica, and Guatemala, where sectors like the coffee industry generated employment in the highlands away from the banana plantations, the north coast of Honduras had long played a highly significant role in the country’s economy. Therefore, the Caribbean lowlands were more densely populated in Honduras than comparable regions elsewhere in Central America. As a result, the problem of foreign labor was more visible and more contentious because West Indians came into more direct competition with Honduran nationals. The reasons for the Honduran government’s more stringent attitude toward immigrant labor was the result of a combination of its significantly weaker national economy and the stronger regional economy of its Caribbean lowland region. Unlike Costa Rica, and Guatemala, where sectors like the coffee industry generated employment in the highlands away from the banana plantations, the north coast of Honduras had long played a highly significant role in the country’s economy. Therefore, the Caribbean lowlands were more densely populated in Honduras than comparable regions elsewhere in Central America. As a result, the problem of foreign labor was more visible and more contentious because West Indians came into more direct competition with Honduran nationals. Another important issue was that Honduras already had a significant indigenous African population in the form of the Garifuna communities of the north coast. Racism toward people of African descent had a longer history in Honduras than elsewhere in the region.

In Honduras, as in Guatemala, West Indian workers formed communities and became politically active in groups like the Universal Negro Improvement Association, all of which made them a target for reactionary politicians and others who saw them as a threat. This threat is often characterized as being purely racial, but it was much more complicated than that because the foreigners worked for foreign companies, and attacks on West Indians were attacks on the corporations they worked for. This combined with various problems associated with the nature of the banana industry and national political struggles to make pariahs of all people of African descent.

Opie and Chambers shed new light on these little-known chapters in the West Indian diaspora to Central America. Like the corporations they worked for, West Indian workers often ignored formal restrictions on their actions
and movement to and through the region. For geographical and strategic business reasons, the fruit companies routinely established plantations in the grey areas where legal jurisdiction was a question of international relations. As third country entities, the multinationals could exploit weaknesses or strife on one side of the border simply by shifting operations from one plantation to another. As a consequence, a proper reading of the history of the banana industry and multinational involvement in Guatemala and Honduras requires an understanding of events as they unfolded on both sides of the international boundary. The two books complement each other because the banana plantation regions they study were located in the border region between Guatemala and Honduras, and there was much interaction between communities along the Caribbean coast of Central America. Ideas such as Garveyism and information about such things as working conditions or labor strife floated up and down the coast, without regard for the international boundary. Both books are worth reading – ideally together, to get a full picture of the little-known history of West Indian labor in this part of Central America.

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