Renée Alexander Craft

When the Devil Knocks: The Congo Tradition and the Politics of Blackness in Twentieth-Century Panama. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2015. xiv + 240 pp. (Cloth US\$ 69.95)

When the Devil Knocks is a “performance-centered critical ethnography” that depicts the Panamanian cultural performance of Congo traditions as a battle between good and evil. The performance is a representation of traditional Afro-colonial heritage, culture, and history by direct descendants of enslaved Africans in Portobelo, Panama.

Renée Alexander Craft’s study melds critical analysis with performance theory and ethnography. Chapter 1 examines twentieth-century black identity politics in Panama and the problematics of black racial identity in two competing groups—Afro-Colonials and West Indian immigrants who came to work on the railroad (1850–55) and canal (1904–14) and struggled to become *afropanameño*. Alexander Craft chronicles national anti-West Indian sentiment, Jim Crow policies in the Canal Zone, and the cultural divisions that separated Afro-Colonials from West Indians. While Afro-Colonials chose a cultural nationalism based on their affiliation with the Panamanian nation-state, West Indians chose a racialized identity. Alexander Craft argues that several national events improved relations and lessened tensions between them and caused Afro-Colonials to adopt a more racialized identity. These events include the invasion by the United States in 1989; the turnover of the Canal to Panama in 1999; the inauguration of Black Ethnicity Day in 2000; the centennial celebrations in 2003; and the *Primer Festival Afropanameño* in 2006. She proposes that these movements, events, and national celebrations provided a way for the two groups to forge relations, though tensions and divisions would seem to remain despite the nation’s attempt to unify them.

Chapter 2 utilizes Raymond Williams’s dichotomy between official and practical consciousness to analyze the cultural performance of Congo traditions in twentieth-century Portobelo. Alexander Craft argues that Congo traditions form part of Portobelo’s official consciousness and thus parody dramas between Spanish colonialists and *cimarrones* (runaway slaves). Here she recreates performances between the Diablo Mayor or Major Devil (Spanish colonialists) and the Congos, black slaves persecuted by Spanish slave masters. Also, there is a generational divide in terms of the meaning of the Devil character. While older more seasoned Congo practitioners view it as representative of colonial enslavers, practitioners in their mid-twenties and younger view it as a metaphor rather than a parody of the Christian Devil. Alexander Craft maintains that this generational shift of interpretation remains important because

the parody serves as a contestatory symbol while the metaphor exhibits complicity with the Spanish colonizers. The second part of the chapter compares and contrasts the meaning of Congo Carnival experiences in 2003 and 2004 through oral narratives. Significantly, one of these was filmed for a tourist audience and the other for members of the community. Alexander Craft notes that the tourism performance is “directed and controlled” while the other is “improvisatory, passionate and spontaneous.”

Chapter 3 utilizes a “circum-local” paradigm to analyze how movement, migration, and assimilation have “distilled” twentieth-century traditions of the devil through descriptions of three persons who have performed the role of the Diabolo Mayor. Of particular interest is Celedonio Molinar Ávila, one of the most respected practitioners of the Diabolo Mayor, who brought the Devil’s persona to life with a simple mask made of cardboard; this contrasts with many of the new masks, which are elaborately decorated. Ávila’s experience and training as the Devil character spanned 49 years and positioned him as a pivotal figure in the maintenance and transmission of the tradition.

Chapter 4 examines the way global tourism affects the performance of gender and sexuality. While performing for the Portobelo community, women are competitive, but when performing for outsiders they are less combative, more demure. Alexander Craft notes that female practitioners perform in this manner to downplay any preconceived notions that outsiders of the community may have of them as erotic, hypersexual, or classless.

Chapter 5 chronicles Alexander Craft’s personal experiences as a performer, beginning in 2001 and going on to stage three more performances. She analyzes the way staging personal performances have allowed her to translate history through her body and better relate to the history and importance of the Congo tradition.

Alexander Craft brings a wealth of experience and an insider’s perspective as both a critical ethnographer and a practitioner of Congo performance since 2000. She provides a detailed analysis of Congo performance in the Portobelo community and brings to life an important aspect of Panamanian and African diaspora culture. Further studies might explore how Congo cultural performances shape black identity outside of Portobelo. It will also be interesting to note how her collaborative digital humanities project, Digital Portobelo: Art+Scholarship+Cultural Preservation, integrates ethnography and performance into a digital platform.

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