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Narrating the Isthmus: Mobilities and Archipelagic Memory in Texts about the Panama Canal

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Willis John Abbot's *Panama and the Canal in Picture and Prose* (1913), a popular history of the Panama Canal construction that sold more than one million copies,¹ begins with the description of Panama as an island. As the ship the author travels on from New York to Panama—a Royal Mail Packet Steam Ship²—approaches the Canal Zone, Abbot observes that Panama “may be called an island” as it can only be reached by the sea: on the sides where Panama is not bordered by water, he explains, it is inaccessible, “walled in by the tangled jungle.”³ Abbot continues his description of Panama's insularity by locating it in “our American Mediterranean,” representing the country in images of a prehistoric tropicality. Among the “creeping vines,” he suggests, even animal life is “stunted and beaten in the struggle for existence” because vegetation grows “so rank and lush” that “only things that crawl on their bellies” can exist in this jungle, such as “giant boas” that are “remnants of the age of reptiles” and ichthyosaurus.⁴ Contrasting Panama's remoteness with the early twentieth-century tourists' mobility to the Zone, Abbot extends the familiar trope of the island that is isolated and frozen in time to the population, stressing the inertness and backwardness of the Panameños and of the Caribbean migrants who work in the Canal Zone. About Jamaicans he states that the “Jamaican negro is a natural loafer” who works “only when he must.”⁵ Referring to the Black laborers who entered the ship during a stopover in Jamaica to travel to the Zone, he describes them as “good-natured, grinning negroes” and as “a cargo of Black ivory.”⁶

Abbot's view of the Canal Zone and its population sheds light on the way many Americans looked at the Zone, a space that became a US unincorporated territory in 1903, after the US had supported Panama's secession from Columbia. The treaty that

the US negotiated with newly independent Panama did not recognize Panama's sovereignty in the Zone, making it an exclusive US territory right in the heart of the country and granting to the US "use, occupation, and control" of the land strip bordering on the planned canal route.⁷ With the territorialization project of the Panama Canal that was organized around the colonization of land and ocean spaces, the isthmus of Panama in the early twentieth century arguably became part of what Lanny Thompson has termed the imperial archipelago⁸ and what Brian Russell Roberts more recently has called the Archipelagic States of America. Roberts uses this term to refer to "the archipelagic portions and aspects of the United States of America," proposing "a postcontinental redescription of the United States" that includes both "vast unintegrated ocean and island territories" as well as "archipelagic spaces that have generally been seen as continental."⁹ Archipelagic American Studies, he points out, might "emerge as a critical framework that plots unexpected convergences among islands and continental spaces."¹⁰ One of the spaces that brings into relief such convergences, Roberts suggests, is the American Mediterranean—which is described by Matthew Pratt Guterl as a "network of rivers, seas, and waterways" that "served as the lifeblood of the New World."¹¹ Abbot refers to it in his book as "our American Mediterranean,"¹² claiming it as the possession of the United States. As the US moved outward to expand its influence to islands in the Pacific and the Caribbean basin—the Philippines, Hawaii, Guam and Samoa, Cuba, Puerto Rico and other islands—the Panama Canal became a crucial link in the American Mediterranean, connecting the different parts of the Archipelagic States of America. It also became an essential element in a vision of US global power and mobility as it had been expressed in Alfred Thayer Mahan's influential book *The Influence of Sea Power upon History* (published in 1890). Mahan, a marine strategist, and navy admiral captain imagined the oceans as a "great highway" as a consequence of motorization and regarded the Panama Canal as an important part of this highway.¹³ As a nodal point between steamship networks and an important element in a web of naval bases and coaling stations that would sustain the nation's fleet of battleships,¹⁴ the canal reflected the new global military and commercial role the United States envisioned for themselves as a world power.

The majority of texts written about the canal in this period presented it as the most visible symbol of US technological and civilizational superiority, linking it to narratives of progress, superb engineering, and technological ingenuity. In Abbot's book, the island imagery of immobility and stasis serves as a background to praise the US for its technological feat of transforming the isthmus into a hub of mobility. He calls the canal project "the most gigantic engineering undertaking since the dawn of time,"¹⁵ citing as its "moral lesson" the superiority and greatness of the United States, the "complete demonstration of the ability of the United States to do its own work for its own people, efficiently, successfully and honestly."¹⁶ Pointing out that "though paid for wholly by the United States, [the canal] is to exist for the general good of all

mankind,” Abbot emphasizes that “in tearing away the most difficult barrier that nature has placed in the way of world-wide trade, acquaintance, friendship and peace” the United States “have done a service to the cause of universal progress and civilization.”¹⁷

The idea that Panama was a disease-infested jungle that like other new “possessions” in the imperial archipelago was in need of modernization by Americans was pervasive in US public discourse, in travel writing such as Abbot’s book but also in academic publications that present the American tropics as a “problem.”¹⁸ So was the tropical triumphalism that characterizes Abbot’s view of the canal and many other visual and textual celebrations of canal construction. Edgar A. Guest, who was called “the People’s Poet” due to the popularity of his poetry, highlighted the exceptional role of American citizens in “The Panama Canal,” symbolized in the American flag that stands

a part and portion of
The courage that once freed the slave.
The strength that fought for liberty
Hewed out the rock that barred its way;
The men who toiled that it might be
Were children of the U. S. A.¹⁹

What remains invisible from view in these celebrations of American superiority are of course the thousands of workers who toiled at the canal and who were not “children of the USA”—many of them Jamaican and Barbadian Black migrant laborers who came to the Zone to make a living or to improve their economic situation. It was these laborers who did most of the digging and who “hewed out the rock”; many of them died through dynamite blasts, suffocation in pits, or cascading rocks in the canal cut.²⁰ Abbot’s description of these workers as “a cargo of black ivory” relegates them back to their formerly enslaved status evoking what Ronald A. Judy has described as “negro liquidity”²¹ with respect to the process that happened on slave ships—of transforming—or “liquefying” what had been Black individuals and “setting the liquefied material into the mold of an exchange-able commodity asset.”²² These Black men, in Abbot’s view, have no agency but are being moved from one location in the American Mediterranean—Barbados—to another—Panama, to be usefully employed. They are not regarded as part of the “mankind” that will profit from the canal; rather, they are excluded from mankind entirely, just like the “things that crawl on their bellies” in Panama’s jungle.²³

Abbot’s text brings the convergences between Barbados and the Panama Canal Zone into relief through the colonialist lens of the imperial archipelago: it frames both sites as bounded, isolated spaces that are only connected by the mobilities created by the Royal Mail Steam Packet Company. The steamship company which ran

between England and the Caribbean via New York was a “mobile network” engaged in “imperial or colonial interactions,” as Anyaa Anim-Addo points out.²⁴ The company’s ships stopped at England’s former slave and sugar colony Barbados and took passengers and workers to the US-controlled canal, another site of imperial intervention. In what follows I want to juxtapose Abbot’s view of the Canal Zone with those presented in two texts by Black US and Panamanian writers: Eric Walrond’s short story collection *Tropic Death* (1926) and Carlos E. Russell’s bilingual prose-poetry history of Black West Indians in Panama *An Old Woman Remembers* (1995). Both texts foreground the relational entanglements and mobile practices between the Canal Zone and the West Indian islands from the perspective of the migrants, and they address the visible and invisible connections that linked the Zone to other spaces on the continent and the globe. Epeli Hau’ofa has pointed out the constant interactions between island communities and the sea and the archipelagic relationality that the sea provided, linking “neighboring islands into regional exchange groups,”²⁵ transcending insularity and connecting all continents, islands, and mainlands. While he is writing about Pacific islands, Walrond’s and Russell’s texts highlight convergences among the Caribbean, the Panama Canal Zone, the US and other spaces and develop critical countergeographies which remap the imperial archipelago by drawing on the vernacular archives of Black labor migrant experiences. In doing so, I contend that Walrond and Russell practice what Michael Pascual has called “archipelagic memory”²⁶ by retrieving an archive of submerged historical experiences that includes different sites, that is preserved mainly in the memories of the members of the migrant communities and that counters US imperial archives. In his study that predominantly focuses on US Filipino literature, Pascual defines archipelagic memory as “a practice of memory that betrays enduring structures of US state-violence as a constitutive element of American belonging and privilege.”²⁷ He emphasizes the political urgency of archipelagic memory, referring to Lisa Lowe’s recent book *The Intimacies of Four Continents*.²⁸ Lowe points out the significance of residual elements and processes of slavery and colonialism that remain invisible in dominant histories and reads the “political, sexual, and intellectual connections and relations among slaves, peoples of indigenous descent, and colonized laborers” as emergent “intimacies of four continents” which is forged out of such residual processes.²⁹ The practice of archipelagic memory, Pascual suggests, is crucial to imagine “alternative collectivities” and “should ultimately lead to dismantling the neoliberal nation state.”³⁰

Moreover, I contend that these texts, in negotiating the logic of rationalization underlying dominant perspectives on the canal and the violence of the construction project, foreground the sedimented history and the imperial uses of water that link the Zone to other expansionist water-bound projects of territorialization.³¹ Applying an archipelagic lens to these texts that focuses not only on linkages over the surface of the earth and the water but also on processes below these surfaces—excavation,

extraction, floodings—will add a dimension of depth to the archipelagic that will render visible the spectral presences of human lives and deaths stored in the deeper layers of soil and water, the sediments of imperial and colonial history in the region. Finally, I argue that these texts give evidence of an everyday cosmopolitanism among the workers that, in Ifeoma Nwankwo's words, is "fundamental to archipelagic identity" and that contradicts the national metanarratives of twentieth-century Panama.³²

Archipelagos of Black Death in Eric Walrond's *Tropic Death*

Eric Walrond was born in Georgetown, British Guyana in 1898, the son of a Barbadian mother and a Guyanese father. He grew up in the Canal Zone and later moved to New York, France, and eventually England. While in New York, he became part of the Harlem Renaissance and thus has been mainly read in the context of that movement and of American Modernism.³³ His only book, *Tropic Death*, was published in 1926, at the height of the Harlem Renaissance, and dramatizes the lives and deaths of the Black migrant Canal laborers of the West Indies. The book consists of ten stories, four set in the Canal Zone while the others focus on the lives of the families of canal workers in Barbados, British Guyana, and Jamaica. Walrond depicts the Zone as a "dead end" for many of those working and living there: Each of the stories ends with a death. Death in the stories is often related to hydrocolonial and imperialist processes of excavation, extraction, and landscape transformation. The text forces us to look beneath the surface and to the depth of the water, dramatizing death as the consequence of a logic that regards Black bodies as fungible assets in the extraction process, a calculated and tolerable risk. As the text enables us to reconstruct an archive of Black experiences and memories of canal construction that have been submerged by the canal and its representation in dominant narratives, it also adds the Canal Zone and the islands from which the workers came to an archipelago of discrete and peripheral sites of waste and Black death.

The first story in the collection, "Drought," shows death to reign not only in the Canal Zone but also among the families of the workers back on the islands. The story is set on Barbados and describes a Black impoverished family who engages in what Walrond characterizes as a "rite absurdly regal"³⁴: They have "afternoon tea"—the only time of the day when the family eats; their daily fare being "cookoo," a kind of corn-mash. Walrond points to the ongoing colonial structures even after independence: "Pauperized native blacks clung to the utmost vestiges of the Crown."³⁵ The family's daughter, Beryl, has developed the habit of eating marl to fill her stomach. Geophagia—the habit of delving into the earth and eating marl or dirt to stop hunger—is a practice that has been reported for spaces throughout the world, especially in South Africa, India, but also Louisiana and Georgia, often related to poverty and deprivation.³⁶ Due to deficient nutrition and scarce food the body begins to crave

minerals contained in the soil, resulting in those affected digging up the earth and eating it. As the small girl eventually sickens and dies, the story implicitly hints at the relations between Barbados and other spaces where food scarcity, poverty and the colonialist structures perpetuating them lead to famish and death. Walrond makes such relations explicit as the narrator explains that “[i]t wasn’t Sepia, Georgia, but a backwoods village in Barbados,”³⁷ linking Barbados and the rural US South. In the story, the main character Coggins, Beryl’s father who is a quarryman, is cutting stones at the command of a whistle. The text connects the extraction of profit from the earth by mining stones for construction to the situation of the workers and to Beryl’s death from eating dirt. As the girl’s “little body [is] lost in the crocus bag frock jutting her skinny shoulders,” the workers in the quarry are described as “sun-crazed blacks” whose throats are parched by the dust and who also suffer from hunger—“pricks at stomachs inured to brackish coffee and cassava pone.”³⁸ Extraction extends to the mining of Black bodies for profit and pleasure: As the plantation economy finds its continuation in the industrial use of bodies and land, the “English white” driver of the rock engine is eating meat out of a water coconut, and a Black girl is standing close by him, suggesting an exploitative sexual relationship between them.³⁹ In the drought that gives the story its title, the earth is dry and waterless while the remaining life is sucked out of Black bodies.

Excavation and death are also at the center of “Subjection,” a story that is set at Toro Point on the Atlantic shore of the canal where breakwaters were constructed from quarried rock. A young Black worker, Ballet, observes the beating of a boy by an American white marine who acts as supervisor. This happens to “the noisy rhythm of picks swung by gnarled black hands” and “sunbaked stones flew to dust, to powder” as the workers at Toro Point sing work songs and carry on “planing a mound of rocky earth dredged up on the barren seashore.”⁴⁰ As he sees the boy fall down, Ballet perceives the wounded body in hyperreal images of fragmented body parts:

A ram-shackle body, dark in the ungentle spots exposing it, reeled and fell at the tip of a white bludgeon. Forced a dent in the crisp caked earth. An isolated ear lay limp and juicy, like some exhausted leaf of flower, half joined to the tree whence it sprang. Only the sticky milk flooding it was crimson, crimsoning the dust and earth.⁴¹

As the violated body makes “a dent in the crisp caked earth” and body parts and dust merge, the violence of excavation extends to the violence exerted on Black workers, blurring the distinction between the human body and the earth: the Black boy’s body becomes a “tree” and the ear a “leaf of flower,” while the blood resembles “sticky milk.” The cruel beating of the boy by the marine that is ignored by most of the Black workers for fear of the white supervisor links the Zone to other sites of violence and

Black fungibility: to slave plantations and gold mines in Panama and the Caribbean and to slavery and Jim Crow violence in the US South. When Ballet confronts the marine he is menaced and eventually shot by him in a way reminiscent of lynchings and racial terror in the US in this period: “‘I’ll git you yet,’ the marine said, gazing at Ballet quietly, ‘I’ll fill you full of lead, you black bastard!’”⁴² Later, as the worker runs away and tries to save his life by hiding in a barrel of liquid tar, the marine kills him “with three sure, dead shots” commenting that he will teach Black workers “down here how to talk back to a white man.”⁴³ Ballet’s dead body sinks into the tar and becomes part of the detritus the canal project leaves behind, while evidence of his murder is made invisible in the records, where he only appears as a “casualty” in the “recent native labor uprisings.”⁴⁴

As Walrond directs our attention to wasted and dead bodies that merge with wasted earth, several stories in his collection take the reader from the surface of the transformed landscape to deeper layers of soil and to the depth of the water, foregrounding the spectral presences underlying the territorialization processes that altered the Zone. In “The Palm Porch,” a story set in a bordello in the city of Colón run by the Jamaican Miss Buckner, the owner looks down from her porch onto a construction site that has rendered the land ghastly, perceiving “[b]lack men behind wheelbarrows” who empty debris into “the maw of a mixing machine” that is compared to an “omnivorous monster.”⁴⁵ Here the text does not only envision the processes of excavation and extraction as a violation of the land but it imagines the ocean as a violated body, upheaving at its invasion:

[D]redges began a moaning noise. It was the sea groaning and vomiting. Through the throat of the pipes it rattled, and spat stones—gold and emerald and amethyst. All sorts of juice the sea upheaved. It dug deep down, far into the recesses of the sprawling cosmos. Back to a pre-geologic age it delved, and brought up things [...] Dross surged up; guava stumps; pine stumps, earth-burned sprats, river stakes.⁴⁶

As the watery soil reluctantly gives up its resources, it spills not only jewels but also the residue of former intrusions. The “sea groaning and vomiting” like a body in pain signals just the latest stage of exploitation of the earth, framing canal construction as part of a series of extractive and expansionist colonial and imperial ventures from slavery to the building of the Panama Railroad to the French Canal project. While under Spanish rule slaves in Panama worked mainly in gold mining and were employed to transport precious metals across the isthmus,⁴⁷ the American endeavor to build a railroad across it during the California Gold Rush in the mid-nineteenth century was designed to enable fortune seekers to cross the continent more rapidly. It accelerated

westward expansion and was hailed as a sign of a new age, that “engendered a new politics of mobility” as Robert D’Aguires points out.⁴⁸ The “earth-burned sprats” and “river stakes” that dredges in “The Palm Porch” turn up can be imagined to be remnants of the railroad construction; they can just as well be leftovers from the incomplete canal construction project undertaken by the famed chief architect of the Suez Canal, the French engineer Ferdinand Lesseps, in the 1880s.⁴⁹

As Miss Buckner watches a gang of Black workers and “a rock engine crushing stone, shooting up rivers of steam, and signaling the frontier’s rebirth,”⁵⁰ the narrator ironically refers to the isthmus as a new frontier, a frontier that emerged in the transnational “new possessions” of the United States. Interestingly, the bordello owner remembers a “virgin past” of the land at the time when she came to Panama and perceives it now as a “sterile menace”.⁵¹

Dark dense thicket; water paving it. Deer, lions, tigers bounding through it. Centuries, perhaps, of such pure, free rule. Then some khaki-clad, red-faced and scrawny-necked whites deserted the Zone and brought saws to the roots of palmetto, spears to the bush cats and jaguars, lysol to the mosquitos and flies and tar to the burning timber-swamp. A wild racing to meet the Chagres and explore the high reaches of the Panama jungle. After the torch, ashes and ghosts—bare, black stalks, pegless stumps, flakes of charred leaves and half-burnt tree trunks.⁵²

Walrond, in having Miss Buckner comment on the land as a frontier with a “virgin past” where land is opened up, mined and transformed into useful infrastructure, evokes an iconic term of westward expansionist mobility, a term popularized by Henry Nash Smith in his 1950 book with the title *Virgin Land*. The metaphor of the virgin land is related to the US’s prerevolutionary settler history and to the concept of *terra nullius*, entailing the “collective wish to disavow the historical fact of the U.S. dispossession of indigenous peoples from their homeland.”⁵³ Walrond, of course, uses the concept of virginity critically as he foregrounds the devastation of the land brought about by “khaki-clad, red-faced” whites who brought saws and torches to the land, deserting and then excavating it. His text points to the imperial dimensions of land transformation and thus anticipates the critical revision of the “virgin land” myth by post-colonial and transnational American studies.⁵⁴ Even before Miss Buckner arrived in the Canal Zone, the land was not “virgin” but had undergone various territorializations that included the displacement of its Indigenous population, mining, plantations, the railroad construction in the nineteenth century and the unsuccessful French canal project. At the time when the US set out to build the canal, the Zone was one of the

most densely populated areas in Panama, and its depopulation—ordered by US president Taft in 1912—was a massive transformation of the landscape and one of the “most traumatic events in early twentieth century Panama.”⁵⁵

Another interesting link between the Canal Zone and Smith’s book emerges in the first part of *Virgin Land*. In the chapter “Passage to India” Smith retraces a central argument used by Thomas Jefferson and other proponents of westward expansion to highlight the importance of crossing the continent to the Far West and reaching the Pacific: expansion was linked to finding a “passage to India”—the “oldest of all ideas associated with America”⁵⁶ that connected westward expansion to Columbus’s vision of “seeking the fabled wealth of the Orient when he discovered that a New World lay between Europe and Asia.”⁵⁷ The advocates of expansion, Smith suggests, saw the continent as an obstacle that had to be overcome to access the Pacific and to be able to “dominate the trade of the Orient” and complete “the circumambulation of the globe”; as American rivers such as “[t]he Arkansas, the Platte, and the Yellowstone rivers” would become “for the people of the United States ‘what the Euphrates, the Oxus, the Phasis and the Cyrus were to the ancient Romans, lines of communication with Eastern Asia and channels for that rich commerce which, for forty centuries, has created so much wealth and power wherever it has flowed.’”⁵⁸ Smith’s transnational imperial vision regarding the American nation links the Lewis and Clarke expedition, John Jacob Astor’s trade company on the Pacific coast as well as the many other endeavors to cross the continent to the vision of a “highway to the Pacific”—the title of his first chapter in the book. The image of a highway crossing land to connect two oceans reappears in the visions of the Panama Canal—most prominently in Mahan’s idea of the oceans as a highway and the canal as part of that highway. As Walrond activates the “virgin land” metaphor in referring to the Canal Zone as a frontier with a virgin past he also ironically invites readers to envision the Zone as a miniature continent and as land that presents an obstacle to the “highway” reaching across various oceans.⁵⁹

In another story, “The Wharf Rats,” two Black boys, the sons of West Indian migrant workers who live in the port city of Colón, entertain tourists on a cruise ship by diving for coins. The tourists, waiting for the ship’s landing, throw coins into the water, while the boys dive for them in a part of the ocean called “deathpool” by the locals—a site where sharks are spawning. Dressed in thick European coats, the tourists watch from the huge cruiseliner, seeing only the surface of the water and the boys in their tiny boat. For them the scenery “is all a bit vague”⁶⁰ as they look down on the boys “with a passive interest.”⁶¹ The story highlights the tourists’ mobility across two oceans in stark contrast to the precarious mobility of the migrants and in particular of the boys who risk their lives diving while to the tourists they are just a local spectacle. Again, the story takes us down into the depth as one boy, Philip, dives to catch a coin.

On the muddy ground of the ocean, he encounters the remnants of earlier excavation projects:

It was a suction sea, and down in it Philip plunged. And it was lazy, too, and willful—the water. Ebony-black, it tugged and mocked. Old brass staves—junk dumped there by the retiring French—thick, yawping mud, barrel hoops, tons of obsolete brass, a wealth of slimy steel faced him.⁶²

It is in this dark murky water that the boy will meet his death. As “the sea tugged and tugged” and “[i]ron staves bruised his shins”⁶³ in the impenetrable dark, he is attacked and eventually killed by a shark. Walrond’s exploration of the depth of the sea and the waste of earlier projects on the isthmus, a waste that Philip’s body becomes part of, evokes the thousands of dark bodies the excavation of the canal and other territorialization efforts had already destroyed. Elizabeth DeLoughrey has discussed the “heavy waters of [Atlantic] ocean modernity”⁶⁴ and the waste that they produce in the form of drowned slave lives. The waste and the lost lives produced by the “heavy waters” of the Panama Canal construction link the canal with the deathscapes of the Middle Passage as well as with other past and more recent processes of excavation, extraction, flows of capital and practices of mobility that have generated nonlife in the oceans on a planetary scale.⁶⁵ The story thus evokes an archive of archipelagic memory relating the death of coindivers on the coast of Panama to other deathscapes, making the Zone a node in an archipelago of watery sites of death. Moreover, it is evocative of other spaces where Black bodies were staged as a spectacle for tourists, their death regarded as a minor incident. One of these spaces is the coastal area of Southern Florida, a site that was advertised on “humorous” postcards distributed by the Florida Tourism Board in the 1920s by showing Black children as “alligator bait.”⁶⁶ These postcards portray Black boys running to escape the wide open mouths of hungry alligators waiting by the river, or they show groups of unsuspecting naked Black children riding away from shorelines on the backs of grinning alligators. Depicting Black children at the mercy of wild animals framed them as primitive beings “returned to nature” by falling prey to other primitive beings, prehistoric alligators.⁶⁷ In the postcards, these deaths are spectacularized along with other “attractions” as an exotic feature of Florida as the US’s domestic tropics or, as some writers framed it, a “domestic Africa.”⁶⁸

While *Tropic Death* questions the claim of civilizational and moral superiority bound to the territorialization of the Zone and to canal construction by foregrounding the tribute of death paid by the Black workers, the text also highlights the Zone as a site of what Ifeoma Nwankwo, referring to the Caribbean, has termed “archipelagic cosmopolitanism”⁶⁹—a vernacular cosmopolitanism among the workers unaccounted for in the American triumphalist discourses. While the US in these discourses was

understood as the more modern and more cosmopolitan nation, due to “its continental geography and economic power,”⁷⁰ as Nwankwo points out, the migrant population in the Zone was highly mobile and cosmopolitan out of necessity—moving to places where they could earn an income. “Among the motley crew recruited to dig the Panama Canal” one story begins, “were artisans from the four ends of the earth.”⁷¹ Nwankwo sees the vernacular cosmopolitanism as it existed in many parts of the Caribbean as fundamental to an archipelagic identity,⁷² and this also applies to the Panama Canal Zone. Not only Americans took advantage of the uneven race and class relations produced by the conditions of this cosmopolitanism. “The Palm Porch” reveals Miss Buckner, the bordello owner from Jamaica, to participate in the mining of wealth as she has bound her and her five daughters’ destiny to the canal project: committing herself to the frontier mentality at the Zone, she prostitutes her mixed-race daughters to “the pale-faced folk,”⁷³ white foreign officers from Britain, Spain, and the US. The dredging of the earth that she bemoans and the mining of her daughters’ bodies for profit has indeed brought up “jewels” as she lives quite comfortably on the money of her customers. Miss Bucker has internalized the racialized economic system of the Zone, constantly admonishing her daughters to take on as clients only white and wealthy men who are on the coveted gold payroll,⁷⁴ instructing them not to spend their time on Black men: “Gold is white; white is gold. Gold-white.”⁷⁵ Walrond’s text thus counters dominant temporal discourses about the Canal Zone by showing the migrants not only to be modern participants in the Canal project and its essential force, but also making use of its economic opportunities.

Chinese Ghosts and Inundated Towns in Carlos E. Russell’s *An Old Woman Remembers*

While Walrond’s text is relatively well-known, at least to those familiar with the Harlem Renaissance, Carlos E. Russell (1934–2018), a Black Panamanian writer and activist, has been largely ignored, as has most of the contemporary Black West Indian Panamanian literature published in English. Born in the Republic of Panama to a family descended from Jamaica and Barbados, he graduated from the National Institute in Panama and left the country in 1955 to study and work in the US. He became a youth worker and later a professor at City University of New York, Brooklyn College, where he taught Latin American, African, and African American literature and culture.

An Old Woman Remembers was published in New York in 1995 by Caribbean Diaspora Press and is a prose-poetry monologue that retraces the history and the memories of Black Panamanian migrants in the Canal Zone since the period of Canal construction.⁷⁶ Written in Barbadian Creole, the text collects the vernacular voices of migrant workers—Jamaican, Trinidadian, Barbadian and others—and their families in Panama, spanning several generations. It tells of the hopes, expectations, and frustrated dreams of those who went to work on the canal and who became part of Panamanian society after its completion.

Sonja Stephenson Watson's 2005 dissertation on Black Panamanian literature—one of the few critical texts that address Russell's work—contextualizes him in the cultural politics of the Black Atlantic and in Du Bois's concept of double consciousness and is mainly concerned with Russell's and other Black Panamanians' struggle to carve out an identity in the Panamanian nation.⁷⁷ While Watson mentions *An Old Woman Remembers*, her discussion focuses on other poems and on his book-length essay, *The Last Buffalo*. I explore *An Old Woman Remembers*'s staging of the mobilities and relationalities between Panama and the West Indies, but also between Panama and China, from where labor migrants came during the construction of the Panama Railroad. Russell foregrounds how migrant lives have been made invisible by the radical reshaping of central Panama's densely populated landscape, as towns and histories were submerged in the waters of the canal. I argue that the text retrieves these mobilities and relationalities in the memories of Black West Indians through archipelagic moments of depth as the text dramatizes the painful losses due to the violence of the imperial project as well as the sunken colonial and imperial history of people and places in Panama before and during canal construction. As *An Old Woman Remembers* evokes the ghostly presences of Chinese and West Indian workers in the altered landscape, it links historical experiences across time and space and fills the gaps in dominant US and Panamanian representations of canal history. The text oscillates between different spaces, collecting fragmented memories of a past set in Africa, on the Caribbean islands, in migrant towns in the Zone, or in present-day Panama. Drawing on the forgotten vernacular archives of Black migrant memory, Russell remaps the geography of the imperial archipelago, uncovering a countergeography that links Panama to China and to Latin American and US plantations as well as to other hydrocolonial endeavors in the Americas.

The first part of the book consists of the long prose poem "An Old Woman Remembers" and is narrated from the perspective of an old woman who looks back on her migration to the Zone from Barbados and her life with her husband, a "silver roll"⁷⁸ worker. As the narrator points out, laborers came "from Barbados [...] Grenada, St. Lucia, St. Vincent. All the other islands got on the bandwagon and went to Panama on contract."⁷⁹ Often the motif is hunger: "when you want to work, when you belly growl from hunger, and you don't know where your next meal coming from,"⁸⁰ hinting—just as Walrond's story "Drought" does—to ongoing colonialist structures on the islands. The poem begins with a scene of departure of young men on "the morning the boats sailed."⁸¹ Their wives and sisters "cry and cry; them never seem to stop," and the narrator who does "not shed one single drop of eye water" tells her sister to stop crying else "if she didn't stop the tears, / she and them other women them / would flood the streets."⁸² The image of tears flooding the streets in anticipation of loss carries a sense of foreboding: it is later paralleled by the flooding of entire towns and

villages, the disappearance of the lived experience of individuals and migrant communities in the rubble of Culebra Cut and in the waters of the canal. While the men set out “to make money, to seek them fortune” the narrator’s sister warns that “your brother Alonzo may not come back and we may just never see him again.”⁸³ Indeed, while after the sailing of the boats “only the letters from Alonzo and Norman [the narrator’s boyfriend] keep we going,”⁸⁴ soon a letter arrives reporting Alonzo’s death in a work accident. The narrator retells the moment in terse and blunt words, conveying the sense of complete erasure of her brother from the family’s life as not even his body is recovered: “A whole mountain fall ‘pon him. Them call it Culebra Cut. [...] Them no find not a trace of me brother. That was that for him. Story done.”⁸⁵ Killed by a dynamite explosion, the brother’s body is buried under the debris of the most dangerous and most feared of all worksites at the canal. Culebra Cut—the eight-mile-long mountain portion of the isthmus that had to be removed and the central site of Panama Canal excavation—was known for frequent landslides, premature dynamite detonations as well as flooding from the daily rains during the rainy season.⁸⁶ At Culebra Cut laborers worked through “torrential rains,” and “amid water and mud that sometimes reached up to their waists, shoveling, breaking rocks, drilling holes”⁸⁷ as Julie Greene observes. The violence of the excavation project—at the site where the American continent was virtually “cut in half” to make room for the canal⁸⁸—was not conveyed by the numerous visual representations of canal construction that emphasize the sublime enormity and complexity of the Canal project. Most of these images obliterate the thousands of laboring bodies who actually dug the canal⁸⁹ and the many who died in the years of construction.

The gendered perspective of the “old woman” emphasizes the narrator’s personal experiences and reflects the particular challenges women faced as the girlfriends and wives of the “Colón Men”⁹⁰: while the latter left for the Zone often with a sense of adventure, the former stayed back waiting, following their men only after being invited to. Left behind pregnant, the narrator gives birth to a son whom she leaves with relatives on Barbados as she travels to the Zone after five years when her boyfriend “arrange for me to come join him.”⁹¹ Upon her arrival she learns that he has started a parallel relationship with a Panamanian woman and has a child with her as well. She marries him anyway and gets a job sifting coal for a steam engine where she works “like man.”⁹² The text highlights the plight of Black women in the Zone, the gender hierarchies they faced and their strategies of survival.

The women’s tears flooding the street upon the men’s departure from Barbados suggests the merging of “eye water” and ocean water, as the workers leave the island for Panama. The hunger and tears of those staying back on islands burdened by the legacy of their colonial history thus merges with the colonial waste and bodies in the depth of the sea and the dead bodies buried at Culebra Cut—a merging that becomes even more prominent as the text reveals the sunken history of migrant towns

and villages. In “Duppy Town,” which follows upon the poem “An Old Woman Remembers,” the ghostliness of the Black and migrant presence in Panama is epitomized in the image of the duppy. The poem compares Panamanian towns that existed in the Zone before the canal was built and those erected for the migrant workers to “duppy umbrellas”—a Jamaican term for mushrooms, but also linked to the supernatural. A duppy in the Caribbean is a ghost or spirit appearing at night,⁹³ hence the phrase “duppy towns” points to the ghostliness of these towns—towns that “mushroomed like ‘duppy umbrellas’” but that are now “gone ... / buried under water/ washed by the Chagres.”⁹⁴ The poem recalls the depopulation of the region’s human communities to make way for the ten-mile-wide Panama Canal Zone⁹⁵ and especially for the creation of a huge artificial lake that is a major part of the canal: the Chagres, the largest river in Panama, was dammed up during canal construction to form Gatún Lake, and in the process the settlements at its banks were flooded. The process resulted in the expulsion of most of the Zone’s population and “the eradication of all its historic Panamanian towns,”⁹⁶ as Marixa Lasso points out. These towns, like the workers at Culebra Cut, remained invisible in the photographs and paintings of the Zone distributed during the construction period. Most images showed only panoramic views of the construction sites, or the American sections of the Zone towns.⁹⁷ Canal construction also led to the displacement of the Indigenous population of the Zone—Kuna, Guyami, and other peoples—who were evicted from their homes, disrupting Indigenous areas of settlement with long histories.⁹⁸ The hydrocolonial logic of canal construction led to a violent and preventable transformation of Panama’s landscape that resulted from decisions benefitting the United States.⁹⁹

“Duppy Town” details the conditions under which the laborers lived and worked before the towns themselves were inundated by Gatún Lake:

Towns where men/women
 Hovered together seeking succor
 From sun
 Rain
 Malaria
 Yellow fever
 And the shattering sounds
 Of dynamite
 Blasting through impenetrable rocks
 Where boisterous commands
 From southern bosses
 And local straw bosses
 Seemed to muffle the rumbling
 Of the falling rocks ...¹⁰⁰

Like the stories in Walrond's *Tropic Death*, the poem highlights the harshness of the laborers' lives, relating it to Black experiences in the US South: a place where "southern bosses" shout commands, and where Black lives such as that of the old woman's brother Alonzo and many others are disposable. The poem goes on to name some of these ghost towns:

Cucaracha
Culebra
Empire
Mandingo
Matachin
Marajal¹⁰¹

The names of the towns recall migrant experiences: they point to Panamanian, Black and Chinese presences, and some link the period of canal construction to other colonialist projects. Mandingo traces back to the presence of West African slaves in Panama in the colonial era and was a settlement on the Mandingo River. Empire was a town that was first designed to expand and flourish under American rule but was later regarded as too "dirty" and ordered to be depopulated. Other towns were informal settlements created by people made homeless by construction, like parts of Culebra.¹⁰² The name Matachin was coined from the Spanish words *matar*, kill, and *chino* for Chinaman and is related to a story the old woman hears about from her husband: the town was named after the many suicides of "Chiney people,"¹⁰³ who were brought to Panama from Canton in the period of the Panama Railroad construction.¹⁰⁴ The Chinese labor migrants "used to have garden everywhere"¹⁰⁵ and endured the hard conditions as long as they were allowed to smoke opium. When the Colombian government prohibited the use of opium by the workers, the number of suicides grew rapidly. Russell foregrounds the historical violence that links Chinese "coolie labor" that was a replacement for slave labor in Latin America, to the plight of Black West Indians as he dramatizes how Matachin, Mandingo and other towns disappeared in the waters of Gatún Lake after the damming of the Chagres. As Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby points out, the water filling the canal upon its completion covered the work of "over thirty years of digging and 25000 lost lives,"¹⁰⁶ thus forever concealing the effects of this rationalization of space. Even the burial places of West Indian railroad and canal laborers who died working in Panama are not safe from being erased by neglect and encroaching industrial development, further extinguishing the memory of migrant presences in Panama. "Duppy Town" concludes with a bitter reminder of these precarious and jeopardized sites: "And we wonder how long/ Will the dusty bones/ Of our forefathers/ Remain undisturbed/ At Mount Hope/ And Corozal."¹⁰⁷

However, the poem also proposes that the Black migrant presences in Panama cannot be completely erased. Like mushrooms or "duppys," the "duppy umbrellas/

returned/ so did the bull frogs/ so did the chirping crickets/ so did the black/green butterflies.”¹⁰⁸ Linking the return of flooded migrant towns in other places to the return of nature, Russell suggests that like nature, these towns will resurface, albeit in different shape and with different names: “La Boca/Red Tank/Paraiso” and others, in a cycle of disappearance and reemergence. “Soon they too would wither and fall/ some early/ some later/ some eventually/ Only to reappear in other forms/ further encrusted in the burgeoning belly/ of a creeping, crawling, groping city.”¹⁰⁹ “Duppy Town” in its reference to Caribbean spirits also insists on an interpretation of the landscape from a perspective informed by Black Caribbean culture. The poem thus questions the validity of the imperial archive, retrieving memories that can be read against this archive and thus reveal, as Michael Pascual insists, “not just the gaps and lacuna of the archive,” but also different narratives that challenge our view of history.¹¹⁰ Eventually, the poem emphasizes, not only does Black West Indian culture resist being subdued and brought under control but the “duppy umbrellas” keep growing, in the places “pushed away/ from the great waterway,” just as Eucalyptus grow and “[s]loths and monkeys/ swing in the vines/ of gorgeous trees.”¹¹¹ Nature itself reclaims space and defies invasive attempts at enforcing control, revealing Panama as a “hybrid zone,” as Sarah Moore has emphasized: a zone that shows “the entanglements between human and nonhuman as well as economic, technological, political, colonial, racial and ecological systems.”¹¹²

A recurrent theme in *An Old Woman Remembers* is the loss of cultural identity in the generations following the migrants who built the canal. Panama’s national master-narrative has rooted the nation’s identity in Latin America, foregrounding its relation to Spain with the result that “a racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse nation became represented almost exclusively by cultural and social values presumably inherited from ‘the motherland.’”¹¹³ Russell stresses that at one point a Panamanian government even wanted to send the workers back to the islands, representing them as “undesirable race.”¹¹⁴ Black West Indians were expected to assimilate or leave, leading to the marginalization and exclusion of their languages and cultural practices. The narrative voice in *An Old Woman Remembers* again and again bemoans this erasure of Black West Indian culture. Not only towns have disappeared, historical knowledge and consciousness has too: Later generations “have lost their ancestral tongue/and some may hate themselves,” as the poem “Beyond Innocence” states.¹¹⁵ In an environment where they are expected to speak Spanish, many have forgotten their native language: “They name is Griffith or Blackman/and they don’t speak English.”¹¹⁶ The text insists on this vernacular memory: The old woman, appealing to her grandchildren, asks “How can we? How can we forget? / That’s we own ... that’s ours ... that’s our past history,/ My father and his father,/ My mother and her mother,/ They was proud people,/ They built countries and civilizations/ Them was Africans.”¹¹⁷

The narrator evokes the migrants' African roots and their slave past against the forgetfulness of later generations and endeavors to instill a sense of pride in that heritage in the children, positing this archipelagic memory of West Indian historical experiences against the nationalist vision of a mestizo Panama that excludes these experiences: "Let us tell our children [...] your veins are filled with the fiery blood / of ancient African kings and queens/ whose sons and daughters/ brought in chains/ lived and died on Caribbean shores."¹¹⁸

Connecting fragmented memories from different spaces, *An Old Woman Remembers* relates memories and experiences set in Africa, on the Caribbean islands, and in migrant towns in the Zone, and highlights the canal as part of the "American" Mediterranean, thus relating it to other waterways that became pathways for the exploration, conquest, and colonization of American territories, such as the Mississippi, the Colorado or the Hudson River. The logic of rationalization underlying the canal project links the Zone to expansion projects that have used these other waterways as "vehicles of expansion," as Elizabeth Pettinaroli and Ana María Mutis point out.¹¹⁹

Both Walrond's and Russell's texts remain marginalized in the critical canon of Black literature in the US. Walrond has recently been reappreciated, even though most Harlem Renaissance criticism remains US-centered. Russell's book has been largely invisible, being out of print and difficult to access.¹²⁰ Their marginality in a way replicates the ghostliness of Black Panamanians and their experiences in US representations of the canal, but also in African American criticism. Yet both authors offer modes of archiving countermemories that contradict and revise official history, presenting a critical reflection on the limitations encountered in colonial and imperial archives.

Exploring these texts from an archipelagic perspective has, first, highlighted Panama's connectedness to other spaces in the American imperial archipelago. While Panama is not an island¹²¹ (and has therefore been left out by Lanny Thompson in his study on the insular territories under US dominion), and has been firmly located on the American continent (and in Latin America) by US and Panamanian official discourse, it underwent transformations similar to those of the insular "new possessions," and was represented in popular and official discourses as yet another spot in the "confetti of empire"¹²² that the US acquired in its endeavor to dominate landed and ocean territory. Like these spaces, it was made "useful" for Americans—at the same time it held a specific strategic position in the Archipelagic States of America by enabling the US to connect its insular possessions in the Pacific and Atlantic oceans. An archipelagic perspective on these texts, second, heightens our awareness for the continuities between Black lives in the US in this period and Black lives in the Canal Zone: Narrating invisible pasts, they add a transnational dimension to the literary representation of the working class Black experience, foregrounding the buried memories of Black canal

laborers, while at the same time linking migrant Panamanian labor to that of Chinese laborers in the Zone. Third, and finally, the texts also deepen our understanding of the archipelagic by highlighting the processes of excavation and flooding and the thousands of lives buried under water, enabling us to connect the canal to other watery deathscapes ensuing from colonialist and imperial endeavors.

Notes

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¹ Alexander Missal, *Seaway to the Future: American Social Visions and the Construction of the Panama Canal*. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2008, 13.

² The Royal Mail Steam Packet Company (RMSPC) was a steamship service that transported mail, passengers and cargo between Britain and the Caribbean. Anyaa Anim-Addo, “Place and Mobilities in the Maritime World: The Royal Mail Steam Packet Company in the Caribbean, c. 1838 to 1914,” (PhD diss., University of London, 2012), 10.

³ Willis J. Abbot, *Panama and the Canal in Picture and Prose* (New York: Syndicate Publishers, 1913), 9.

⁴ Abbot, *Panama and the Canal*, 9–10.

⁵ Abbot, *Panama and the Canal*, 19.

⁶ Abbot, *Panama and the Canal*, 22.

⁷ In the Hay–Bunau–Varilla Treaty, as the 1903 Panama Canal treaty is officially known, Panama granted the US the “use, occupation, and control” in perpetuity of a strip of land 5 miles wide on either side of the proposed canal route in exchange for a modest cash payment. See Walter LaFeber, *The Panama Canal: The Crisis in Historical Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 37–38.

⁸ Lanny Thompson, *Imperial Archipelago: Representation and Rule in the Insular Territories under U.S. Domination after 1898*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2010.

⁹ Brian Russell Roberts, *Borderwaters. Amid the Archipelagic States of America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021), 23.

¹⁰ Roberts, *Borderwaters*, 50.

- ¹¹ Matthew Pratt Guterl, *American Mediterranean* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013) 11, qtd. in Roberts, *Borderwaters*, 50.)
- ¹² My emphasis. Abbot, *Panama and the Canal*, 10.
- ¹³ Missal, *Seaway to the Future*, 28.
- ¹⁴ Christine Keiner, *Deep Cut: Science, Power, and the Unbuilt Interoceanic Canal* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2020), 25–26.
- ¹⁵ Abbot, *Panama and the Canal*, 1.
- ¹⁶ Abbot, *Panama and the Canal*, 411.
- ¹⁷ Abbot, *Panama and the Canal*, 412.
- ¹⁸ E.g., geographer Ellsworth Huntington’s 1915 *Climate and Civilization* compares the more industrious, temperate, and healthy US to the American tropics, a place of laziness, impulsivity, and disease (Ellsworth Huntington, *Climate and Civilization*, [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1915; reprint New York: Wiley, 1945]). See Fernando José Coscioni, “Ellsworth Huntington: considerations on the letters of the ‘distribution of civilization’ map of Civilization and Climate,” *Geosp—Espaço e Tempo* (On-Line) 24, no. 1 (April 2020): 59, <https://doi.org/10.11606/issn.2179-0892.geosp.2020.162309>.
- ¹⁹ Edgar Albert Guest, “The Panama Canal,” 1915. *InternetPoem.com*. <https://internetpoem.com/edgar-albert-guest/the-panama-canal-poem/>
- ²⁰ Irma Watkins-Owens, *Blood Relations: Caribbean Immigrants and the Harlem Community, 1900–1930* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 14.
- ²¹ Ronald A. Judy, “The Unfungible Flow of Liquid Blackness,” *Liquid Blackness: Journal of Aesthetics and Black Studies* 5, no. 1 (April 2021): 31, <https://doi.org/10.1215/26923874-8932565>.
- ²² Judy, “The Unfungible Flow,” 30.
- ²³ As Stephanie K. Dunning has observed in her study on nature and blackness, “both nature and Blackness are defined as ‘outside’ of society.” Stephanie K. Dunning, *Black to Nature: Pastoral Return and African American Culture* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2021) 5.
- ²⁴ Anim-Addo, “Place and Mobilities in the Maritime World,” 10.
- ²⁵ Epeli Hau’ofa, “The Ocean in Us,” *The Contemporary Pacific*, 10, no. 2 (1998): 404.

- ²⁶ Michael Pascual, "Archipelagic Memory: Reading US Filipino Literature and Visual Art Beside US Imperial Archives" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2021), 4.
- ²⁷ Pascual, "Archipelagic Memory," 4.
- ²⁸ Pascual, "Archipelagic Memory," 18.
- ²⁹ Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015, 19.
- ³⁰ Pascual, "Archipelagic Memory," 130–31.
- ³¹ Here I draw on Isabel Hofmeyr's concept of hydrocolonialism by which she describes "the different levels of colonial control exerted by means of, over, and through water." Isabel Hofmeyr, "Literary Ecologies of the Indian Ocean," *English Studies in Africa* 62, no. 1 (2019): 3.
- ³² Ifeoma Kiddoe Nwankwo, "Living the West Indian Dream: Archipelagic Cosmopolitanism and Triangulated Economies of Desire in Jamaican Popular Culture," in *Archipelagic American Studies*, ed. Brian Russell Roberts and Michelle Ann Stephens (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 394.
- ³³ See for example: Michelle Ann Stephens, "Eric Walrond's Tropic Death and the Discontents of American Modernity," in *Prospero's Isles: The Presence of the Caribbean in the American Imaginary*, ed. Diane Accaria-Zavala and Rodolfo Popelnik (London: Macmillan-Caribbean 2004), 16–78. See also: Imani D. Owens, "'Hard Reading': US Empire and Black Modernist Aesthetics in Eric Walrond's Tropic Death," *MELUS* 41, no. 4 (Winter 2016), 96–115.
- ³⁴ Eric Walrond, *Tropic Death* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 2013), 31.
- ³⁵ Walrond, *Tropic Death*, 31.
- ³⁶ Alexander Woywodt and Akos Kiss, "Geophagia: the history of earth-eating." *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* 95, no. 3 (2002): 143–46.
- ³⁷ Walrond, *Tropic Death*, 22.
- ³⁸ Walrond, *Tropic Death*, 21.
- ³⁹ Walrond, *Tropic Death*, 22.
- ⁴⁰ Walrond, *Tropic Death*, 99.
- ⁴¹ Walrond, *Tropic Death*, 100.
- ⁴² Walrond, *Tropic Death*, 101.

- ⁴³ Walrond, *Tropic Death*, 111.
- ⁴⁴ Walrond, *Tropic Death*, 111.
- ⁴⁵ Walrond, *Tropic Death*, 85.
- ⁴⁶ Walrond, *Tropic Death*, 86.
- ⁴⁷ 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), 28.
- ⁴⁸ Robert d'Aguires, *Mobility and Modernity: Panama in the Nineteenth Century American Imagination* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2017), 4.
- ⁴⁹ After the French had given up the seemingly hopeless undertaking of digging a canal across the isthmus, dejected by engineering problems and a high mortality rate among the workers due to tropical diseases and excruciating work, the US took over the project in 1904 and opened the canal 10 years later.
- ⁵⁰ Walrond, *Tropic Death*, 85.
- ⁵¹ Walrond, *Tropic Death*, 85.
- ⁵² Walrond, *Tropic Death*, 86.
- ⁵³ Donald E. Pease, *The New American Exceptionalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 155.
- ⁵⁴ See, e.g., Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease, eds., *Cultures of United States Imperialism* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1993); Annette Kolodny, *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975); Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. (London: Routledge, 2000); and Caroline S. Levander and Robert S. Levine, eds. *Hemispheric American Studies* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2008).
- ⁵⁵ Marixa Lasso, *Erased: The Untold Story of the Panama Canal* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), 2.
- ⁵⁶ Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Copyright 1950 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College, hypertext version prepared by the American Studies Group at The University of Virginia 1995–1996, editing and formatting and by Eric J. Gislason, February/March 1996), 19.
- ⁵⁷ Smith, *Virgin Land*, 19. In fact one of Columbus's principal aims on his fourth and final voyage in 1502 was to discover a water passage running westward between the two

great land masses of Cuba and the Paria peninsula in Venezuela, which he assumed would lead from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean. Columbus made landfall at Almirante Bay, Panama, and unsuccessfully attempted to establish a trading post on the bank of the Belén River where Indigenous resistance and the poor condition of his ships forced him to return to Hispaniola.

- ⁵⁸ Here Smith quotes from an 1819 editorial from the *St. Louis Enquirer* on the subject of Oregon and Texas. Qtd. in Smith, *Virgin Land*, 25.
- ⁵⁹ I would like to thank Brian Russell Roberts for pointing out the relevance of Smith's text for my discussion of Walrond's story.
- ⁶⁰ Walrond, *Tropic Death*, 82.
- ⁶¹ Walrond, *Tropic Death*, 81.
- ⁶² Walrond, *Tropic Death*, 82.
- ⁶³ Walrond, *Tropic Death*, 82.
- ⁶⁴ Elizabeth DeLoughrey, "Heavy Waters: Waste and Atlantic Modernity," *PMLA* 125, no. 3 (May 2010): 708.
- ⁶⁵ See Julieta Aranda and Eben Kirksey, "Toward a Glossary of the Oceanic Undead: A(mphibious) through F(utures)," *E-flux Journal* 112 (October 2020).
- ⁶⁶ Nicole Ashanti McFarlane, "The Racial Rhetoric of Cuteness as Decorative Decorum" (PhD diss., Clemson University, 2012), 20.
- ⁶⁷ James M. Reitter, "Modem Dragons: The Crocodilian in the Western Mind" (PhD diss., University of Louisiana at Lafayette, 2006), 187.
- ⁶⁸ The term domestic Africa is used by Jennifer Rae Greeson who argues that the southern states under reconstruction were framed by Northern writers such as Josiah Gilbert Holland as "conquered provinces" and "a sort of domestic Africa" (243) within the nation—part of the nation but alien and at the same time "a point of privileged and intimate access to Spanish America, as well as to other underdeveloped sites around the globe (Jennifer Rae Greeson, *Our South: Geographic Fantasy and the Rise of National Literature*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010, 251).
- ⁶⁹ Nwankwo, "Living the West Indian Dream," 380–410.
- ⁷⁰ Nwankwo, "Living the West Indian Dream," 394.
- ⁷¹ Walrond, *Tropic Death*, 67.
- ⁷² Nwankwo, "Living the West Indian Dream," 394.

- ⁷³ Walrond, *Tropic Death*, 89.
- ⁷⁴ The payroll system that replicated the spatial and racial order of the US excluded local and Caribbean workers from the American living quarter and separated the labor force into “silver” workers and “gold” workers. “Silver” workers—usually nonwhite—received but a fraction of the payment that white Americans who were on the gold payroll system received.
- ⁷⁵ Walrond, *Tropic Death*, 91.
- ⁷⁶ Russell’s work also includes the poetry collections *Miss Anna’s Son Remembers* (1976) and *Remembranzas y lágrimas* (2001). Both are bilingual. He has also published the book-length essay *The Last Buffalo: “Are Panamanians of Caribbean Ancestry an Endangered Species?”* (2003).
- ⁷⁷ Sonja Stephenson Watson, “‘Black Atlantic’ Cultural Politics as reflected in Panamanian Literature” (PhD diss., University of Tennessee, Knoxville, 2005).
- ⁷⁸ Carlos E. Russell, *An Old Woman Remembers—The Recollected History of West Indians in Panama, 1855–1955: A Prose-Poetry Monologue* (New York: The City University of New York, Caribbean Diaspora Press, 1995), 10.
- ⁷⁹ Russell, *An Old Woman Remembers*, 21.
- ⁸⁰ Russell, *An Old Woman Remembers*, 21
- ⁸¹ Russell, *An Old Woman Remembers*, 1.
- ⁸² Russell, *An Old Woman Remembers*, 1.
- ⁸³ Russell, *An Old Woman Remembers*, 2.
- ⁸⁴ Russell, *An Old Woman Remembers*, 4.
- ⁸⁵ Russell, *An Old Woman Remembers*, 7.
- ⁸⁶ Julie Greene, *The Canal Builders: Making America’s Empire at the Panama Canal* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2009), 62.
- ⁸⁷ Julie Greene, *The Canal Builders*, 62.
- ⁸⁸ Workers excavated more than one hundred fifty million cubic meters of rock and soil. See Keiner, *Deep Cut: Science*, 28.
- ⁸⁹ Sarah Moore, “The Panama Canal Zone as a Hybrid Landscape: A Case Study,” in *Ecocriticism and the Anthropocene in Nineteenth-Century Art and Visual Culture*, ed. Maura Coughlin and Emily Gephart (New York: Routledge, 2020), 61.

- ⁹⁰ The West Indian contract workers were called “Colón Men” after the Panamanian city of Colón on the Caribbean coast where many of them lived (apart from the American Quarter and often in substandard living quarters). On the “Colón Men,” see Rhonda D. Frederick, “Colón Man A Come”: *Mythographies of Panamá Canal Migration* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2005).
- ⁹¹ Russell, *An Old Woman Remembers*, 7.
- ⁹² Russell, *An Old Woman Remembers*, 9.
- ⁹³ In Jamaican obeah, duppy is an ancestral spirit, as Zora Neale Hurston points out in *Tell My Horse*, and they can do evil things: “all duppies got power to hurt you” (Zora Neale Hurston, *Tell My Horse*, 1938 [Adobe Acrobat e-Book. New York: HarperCollins, 2008] 45).
- ⁹⁴ Russell, *An Old Woman Remembers*, 29.
- ⁹⁵ Keiner, *Deep Cut: Science*, 29.
- ⁹⁶ Lasso, *Erased*, 95.
- ⁹⁷ Lasso, *Erased*, 95.
- ⁹⁸ Sandra L. Henderson, “The Face of Empire: The Cultural Production of U.S. Imperialism in the Panama Canal Zone and California, 1904–1916” (PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2016), 93.
- ⁹⁹ Keiner, *Deep Cut: Science*, 29.
- ¹⁰⁰ Russell, *An Old Woman Remembers*, 29.
- ¹⁰¹ Russell, *An Old Woman Remembers*, 30.
- ¹⁰² Lasso, *Erased*, 122.
- ¹⁰³ Russell, *An Old Woman Remembers*, 16.
- ¹⁰⁴ Chinese workers were recruited by the Panama Railroad Company and arrived on ships that were called “floating hells” due to the inhumane conditions of the journey. Most Chinese were consigned at the ports and were attracted by misleading promises; others wanted to escape poverty at home. Later waves of Chinese immigration occurred during the French and American Canal projects. Ramón A. Mon, “The Chinese of Panamá also have a story to tell ...” *ReVista: Harvard Review of Latin America* 12, no. 3 (Spring 2013): 46–48.
- ¹⁰⁵ Russell, *An Old Woman Remembers*, 16.

- ¹⁰⁶ Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, *Colossal: Engineering Modernity: Suez Canal Statue of Liberty Eiffel Tower Panama Canal* (Pittsburgh, PA: Periscope Publishing, 2009), 149.
- ¹⁰⁷ Russell, *An Old Woman Remembers*, 32. Mount Hope and Corozal are two cemeteries in the former Zone for West Indian canal workers.
- ¹⁰⁸ Russell, *An Old Woman Remembers*, 31.
- ¹⁰⁹ Russell, *An Old Woman Remembers*, 31.
- ¹¹⁰ Pascual, "Archipelagic Memory," 133.
- ¹¹¹ Russell, *An Old Woman Remembers*, 32.
- ¹¹² Moore, "The Panama Canal," 62.
- ¹¹³ Adela Mendieta, Rogelio Husband, *Contribución del Afro-Antillano a la Identidad Nacional. Licenciatura* (Licenciatura thesis, University of Panamá, 1997), 204.
- ¹¹⁴ Russell, *An Old Woman Remembers*, 13.
- ¹¹⁵ Russell, *An Old Woman Remembers*, 45.
- ¹¹⁶ Russell, *An Old Woman Remembers*, 15.
- ¹¹⁷ Russell, *An Old Woman Remembers*, 15.
- ¹¹⁸ Russell, *An Old Woman Remembers*, 45.
- ¹¹⁹ Elizabeth M. Pettinaroli and Ana María Mutis, Introduction, "Troubled Waters: Rivers in Latin American Imagination," *Hispanic Issues* 12, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 2, <https://hdl.handle.net/11299/184426>.
- ¹²⁰ After its publication in 1995 it was not republished and to this day is found only in a few libraries and second-hand bookstores.
- ¹²¹ It bears keeping in mind, however, that the Isthmus of Panama emerged as an archipelago of volcanic islands. Around twenty million years ago the plates that formed the continents of North and South America began to move toward each other, collided and created underwater volcanoes. Volcanic islands and sediments between them filled the area over the next several million years, eventually creating a landbridge between North and South America that enabled plant and animal migration between the two continents. Arun Kumar, "Geology of the Isthmus of Panama, History of the Panama Canal and a Visit to the Barro Colorado Island," *Earth Science India—Popular Issue* 6, no. 4 (October 2013): 3.
- ¹²² Elaine Stratford's term for the US insular possessions that formed the imperial archipelago; Elaine Stratford, "Imagining the Archipelago," in *Archipelagic American*

Studies: Decontinentalizing the Study of American Culture, ed. Brian Russell Roberts and Michelle Ann Stephens (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 80.

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