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The Black Central Americas Project:

Phase I: Constellating Black Central America

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Abstract

The Black Central Americas (BCA) Project is a digital public humanities initiative to explore and advance Black Central American history, culture, and scholarship. Through its core mission, the BCA Project provides a transdisciplinary and transnational platform that fosters discourse and hosts innovative programming within the field of Black Central American Studies. The project's first phase, "Constellating Black Central America," involves creating an interactive and creative digital mapping platform. This platform will illuminate the histories, cultures, and migration patterns of Black and Black Indigenous Central American communities across Central and North America.

The primary objectives of this phase are to record and visually represent historical and current data related to Black diasporic movements in efforts to generate new insights into migration trends and to address a significant gap in Caribbean digital scholarship. The digital map we are creating will be valuable for historians, sociologists, anthropologists, artists, and non-traditional and independent scholars. Our main aim is to bring attention to Black Central America and its diverse diasporas within the context of Caribbean digital scholarship. By highlighting the underrepresented stories of Black Central America, our overachieving objective is to fill a long-existing gap in Caribbean Studies.

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Introduction: Phase I - Constellating Black Central America

Black Central American narratives have been historically underrepresented in academic scholarship and public discourse. This project aims to fill that gap by creating a platform for discussions and innovative Black Central American Studies programs. Using a Black feminist and community-based approach, the Black Central America (BCA) Project will focus on the digital and transient aspects of Black Central American diasporic culture and knowledge production. The project will explore themes of migration, movement, and the creation of communities in the face of centuries of displacement.

The main goal of this research is to support the "Mapping Black Central America" initiative, which is the first phase of the BCA Project. This phase focuses on creating an innovative and interactive mapping platform that showcases the histories, cultures, and migration patterns of Black and Black Indigenous Central American communities across Central and North America. Through this research, we aim to bridge a longstanding critical gap in Caribbean Studies by bringing greater visibility to the experiences and contributions of Black Central American communities.

Methodology

In order to achieve our objectives, our research will involve conducting a comprehensive literature review based on credible primary and secondary sources related to Black Central American history. This review will include significant events, impactful figures, and important institutions. We will gather texts in both English and Spanish to ensure a thorough understanding

of the subject matter. Additionally, we will consult social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube to gather perspectives that complement the historical data. Every two weeks, we produced a 1,000-1,200-word report focused on one of the three assigned cities. These reports will be added to the project's website to create an accessible educational resource that highlights the underrepresented narratives of Black Central America's diasporas.

As Laidlaw Scholars, our specific role involves producing detailed, site-specific research reports on Black history, politics, and culture for the following cities: San Miguel, El Salvador; La Ceiba, Honduras; Livingston, Guatemala; Limón, Costa Rica; Panama City, Panama; and Colón, Panama. These reports will be vital elements of the digital map, providing valuable insights and broadening the scope of information available on the dynamic diasporas of Black Central America. For this paper, we are focusing on two cities: San Miguel, El Salvador, and Livingston, Guatemala.

City-Specific Reports : Historical and Demographic Context

- A concise history of Afro-descendants in the site during the colonial period (16th-19th centuries), highlighting enslavement, marronage, and resistance to colonial violence through education, law, press, and arts.
- Key dates and events in the history of Afro-descendant communities.
- Overview of the city's historical and current demographics (racial and ethnic makeup) and major migration patterns across the Central American isthmus and beyond.

San Miguel, El Salvador

Around 7,441 of the Salvadoran population self-identifies as Afro-descendants. However, the black descendant population has been continuously excluded from Salvadoran history. El Salvador is considered to have the highest “multi-racial” population in the Americas, with 94% considered mestizo; however, there is little discussion of the African contribution to Salvadoran history. “Many Salvadorans today are unaware of El Salvador’s African heritage and the African contribution made to mestizo culture has often gone unrecognized by Salvadoran scholars” (Williams 2001). The ancestry of the Salvadoran people is predominantly indigenous, with some mixed descent from colonial African slaves, European immigrants, and Spanish colonizers. This can likely be attributed to El Salvador being the only Central American country without a Caribbean coast. Central Americans refer to this population as mestizo and Afro-Salvadorans are sometimes referred to as Afro-mestizos (Williams 2001). This has led to El Salvador being seen as the only Central American country that does not have a “black population”. However, El Salvador’s Afro-Salvadorans are connected to the earlier Spanish Colonial era. The African population has mixed into the bloodlines of El Salvador to form a multi-racial population, in which many Afro-descendants do not know of their African ancestry (Williams 2001).

In 1541, over 10,000 Africans were forcibly brought to El Salvador following the ordinance. In the 1540s and 50s, many Africans were forced to work in the gold mines around San Miguel. During the colonial era, several towns and cities had populations consisting of mostly Africans (Williams 2001). According to colonial records in these regions have ties to Angola, the Guineas, and from Mozambique (Rodríguez 2012).

As time went on, Mulatto (mixed African and White descent) and Zambo (mixed Indigenous and African descent) communities formed, and racially mixed children were free under Spanish law. By 1779, 31% of the Salvadoran population was of mixed ancestry. In November, 1824, slavery was abolished in El Salvador, becoming the first nation in the “New World,” other than Haiti, to abolish slavery. This led to several enslaved people from Belize escaping to El Salvador and starting lives there, continuing to mix into the population. At the end of the colonial period, the majority of the population did not maintain strong ethnic ties to their Indigenous, African, or European descent (Williams 2001). However, this assimilation came from the cultural pressure of the country to “whiten” themselves with the goal of social mobility (Rodríguez 2012).

Today, Afro-Salvadoran history is often overlooked, and many believe there are no Black Salvadorans, which leads to Afro-Salvadorans facing stigma and erasure. General Maximiliano Hernández Martínez was a dictator president of El Salvador from 1935 to 1944 is another reason why the presence of Black Salvadorans has been diminished. He created immigration laws forbidding migration from most non-European countries. Carlos Lara, an artist and anthropology student in San Salvador explains that the Salvadoran desire for whiteness and erasing blackness also has ties to the caste system from the colonial period, which favored lighter-skinned people (Cruz 2023). Despite the systematic erasure of Blackness in El Salvador, African heritage still appears in culture and language.

Livingston, Guatemala

Livingston, Guatemala, is small, vibrant town rich in cultural heritage only accessible by boats, primarily inhabited by the Afro-descendant Garifuna and indigenous Maya Q'eqchi' people (“Garifuna People, History and Culture,” n.d.). "In the 1970s, Livingston's Garifuna

population was around 10,000 and has dwindled to around 4,000 today" (Amaryah 2022). The Garifuna people in Livingston are descendants of Africans who were forced into the transatlantic slave trade.

Their journey began with a shipwreck in 1653 near the island of St. Vincent. The ship, carrying Africans from what we now know as Nigeria, allowed its survivors to escape and integrate with the indigenous Caribbean people, forming a new community on the island (Gudmundson and Wolfe 2010). This union was disrupted in the 17th century when the British invaded St. Vincent. Despite their resistance, the Garifuna were eventually forced to leave for Roatán, an island in Honduras, in 1796. From there, the Garifuna spread along the Caribbean coast, establishing settlements, including Livingston in Guatemala (Amaryah 2022).

During colonization, enslaved Africans resisted their conditions in various ways. Many escaped and established maroon communities in remote, inaccessible areas such as dense forests or mountains. These communities provided a safe refuge from colonial authorities and allowed (Vox 2019)—afro-descendants to preserve African cultural practices and traditions. Rebellions and uprisings against colonial oppressors were frequent, showing their persistent resistance and longing for freedom despite violently suppressing many obstacles.

However, one of the most significant forms of resistance was education. Secret schools were established within maroon communities or hidden locations where Afro descendants could learn to read and write. Education empowered them with knowledge, enabling effective communication, organization, and resistance. In addition, legal resistance involved utilizing the limited legal avenues available within the colonial system. Enslaved and free Afro-descendants sometimes used legal petitions and appeals to advocate for their rights or challenge their

conditions. Although the colonial legal system was heavily biased, these legal battles occasionally resulted in small victories(The National Archives, n.d.)). Finally, artistic expression was also another significant form of resistance. Music, dance, storytelling, and other art forms allowed Afro-descendants to preserve their cultural heritage, express their identities, and resist cultural assimilation.

In the early 19th century, Livingston became a unique cultural enclave primarily inhabited by the Garifuna people. Their history of resistance includes preserving their language, traditions, and cultural practices despite colonial pressures (Mark David Anderson 2009).The Garifuna community in Livingston continues to uphold their cultural heritage, maintaining a distinct identity within the broader Guatemalan society. In 2001, The Garifuna language, dance, and music were proclaimed a "Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO" (Ancestors, n.d.), bringing international recognition to Garifuna culture. Their rich music, dance, and oral history traditions have become enduring symbols of resistance and resilience against colonial and post-colonial challenges. The history of Afro-descendants in Livingston, Guatemala, during the colonial period, is marked by a continuous struggle for freedom and resistance against oppression.

City-Specific Reports : Contemporary Black Social Movement

- Key contemporary (20th century to present) Black social movements, including, for example, Black feminist organizing, movements for territorial rights, and/or cultural and arts movements

San Miguel, El Salvador

La Matanza: On January 22, 1932, thousands of campesinos (peasant workers) and Indigenous people came together to rebel against General Maximiliano Hernández Martínez's authoritarian regime (Cuéllar 2018, 39). The rebellion, called "La Matanza" was led by Agustín Farabundo Martí, a campesino revolutionary and member of the Salvadoran Communist Party. The rebellion stemmed from the Salvadoran wage labor system, which replaced the colono system (where workers received plots of land in exchange for labor) and the rapid growth of coffee plantations. These systems encroached on campesino and Indigenous land and concentrated land in the hands of the "coffee elite," increasing inequality along racial and ethnic lines, and leading to struggles for land, hunger, and securing the means of social reproduction (Cuéllar 2018, 42-43). The rebellion was eventually crushed, and the elimination of dissent was so thorough that it was referred to as a "cultural mestizaje," which meant that through the national citizenship project, all Indigenous peoples were eliminated, made mestizo, and ladinized (assimilated to the Spanish-speaking, Hispanic, dominant culture). Following the rebellion, indigeneity became increasingly marginalized and folklorized (Cuéllar 2018, 46-47).

Afro-Salvadorans also participated in La Matanza. However, in 1933, Hernández Martínez passed the Migration law, which targeted communities along racial lines. The law prohibited "the migration of peoples from China and Mongolia, any members of the black race, Malaysians," and more. This law fueled a narrative that Africans are from elsewhere, which has carried to today, when Afro-Salvadorans are still unrecognized (Cuéllar 2018, 48). The fallout of La Matanza was the simultaneous elimination of Indigeneity and the expulsion of Blackness from El Salvador. The loss of those identities in El Salvador extends to today and increases the difficulty of obtaining space to discuss discrimination and mobilizing issues, as well as to claim territorial space (Cuéllar 2018, 50-51).

Digital Organizing: The digital sphere is an essential place for Salvadoran visibility, recognition, and activism. AFROOS uses its Instagram platform to highlight stories of Afro-descendants. It also publishes digital photo galleries that highlight similar stories. Several organized events and celebrations are promoted and discussed on these platforms as activists act in diasporic solidarity or advocate for their own recognition.

Salvadoran Afro-descendants Day: On August 29th each year, El Salvador celebrates the day of Salvadoran Afro-descendants. It is celebrated during El Salvador's Black History month to promote heritage, culture, respect, and realization of the fundamental freedoms and rights of Afro-descendants (Cruz 2023; SomosAfro 2021). The day was first celebrated in 2014 and festivities often includes music, cultural foods, and dance (Sibrian 2023).

Livingston, Guatemala

The Organización Negra Centroamericana (ONECA) was founded in Belize in 1995 to advance the integral development of Afro-Central American communities and combat racism and discrimination. The organization rapidly grew into an international network that connected different black movements throughout Central America. This expansive network was also linked to efforts on a continental and global scale, promoting a feeling of solidarity and common goal among Afro-descendant communities worldwide, known as the Afro-descendant diaspora movement (“Asambleas de La Organización Negra Centro Americana – Casa Yurumein,” n.d.).

In the early 1990s, there was a significant change in how people worldwide saw and appreciated different cultures and ethnicities within their own countries. This shift created a great environment for groups like ONECA, especially in Latin America. People were starting to notice

and speak out about how certain racial and ethnic groups had been left out or treated unfairly, leading to a strong demand for change.

ONECA's work extended its influence to Guatemala, forming ONEGUA (Organización Negra de Guatemala) in 1995. ONEGUA's establishment represented a critical step in recognizing and empowering Afro-Guatemalans, who, like other Afro-descendant groups in the region, had long faced social, economic, and political marginalization. The establishment of ONEGUA reflects a more significant movement in Latin America, where Afro-descendant communities advocate for their rights and more representation in national stories. This movement aligns with global conversations about multiculturalism and human rights, emphasizing the importance of recognizing and addressing the unique challenges faced by ethnic and racial minorities.

Through its efforts, ONECA, along with its regional branches like ONEGUA, played a pivotal role in raising awareness about the issues affecting Afro-descendant populations. They worked tirelessly to ensure that these communities had a voice in national and regional dialogues, advocating for policies that promote social justice, equality, and cultural recognition. Their work has empowered these communities and brought their issues to the forefront.

The Organización Fraternal Negra Hondureña (OFRANEH) is another organization dedicated to advocating for the autonomy and upholding the collective social, economic, cultural, and territorial rights of the Garífuna people through ongoing efforts. “The mission of OFRANEH is to eradicate historical injustices and the loss of the Garífuna peoples' patrimony, and to recuperate and strengthen their ancestral cultural identity and spirituality” (“Organización Fraternal Negra Hondureña (OFRANEH)” 2023). One of their notable leaders is Miriam Miranda , who became the leader of the organization. Her courage and leadership have been

instrumental in the organization, as she fearlessly questions development proposals that endanger the land, environment, and way of life of the Garifuna community(Hill 2021).

In conclusion, from the founding of ONECA and its impact on Afro-descendant movements in Central America to the courageous activism of Miriam Miranda with OFRANEH, these prominent modern Black social movements showcase the constant challenges and successes in promoting the rights, acknowledgment, and cultural legacy of Black communities. These movements emphasize the significance of solidarity, perseverance, and activism in the battle against racial discrimination and for the incorporation and empowerment of Afro-descendant communities in the 20th century and beyond.

City Specific Reports: Important Institutions and Individuals

- Important institutions (cultural centers, organizations, museums, etc.) and Black artists, organizers, and/or scholars

San Miguel, El Salvador

Afrodescendientes Organizados Salvadoreños (AFROOS) is a Salvadoran organization that works to recognize and fight for the Afro-Salvadoran populations to guarantee their rights.

Zaira Miluska Funes created the page @Centam_Beauty, in 2017, to “celebrate all things Central American” and create a space to embrace and celebrate Central American culture and beauty (VoyageLA and Funes 2019).

Breena Nuñez (she/they) is an Afro Salvadoran-Guatemalan cartoonist from the Bay Area. They create comics centering their experiences of blackness, being Central American in the Bay Area, queerness, and the awkwardness of racism.

Ana Yency Lemus Chavez is an Afro-Salvadoran activist and human rights defender. She is the founder and leader of a youth-led organization called Afrodescendiente Organizados Salvadoreños (AFROOS) (One Young World 2023).

Prudencia Ayala was a Salvadoran Afro-indigenous writer, activist, and fighter for women's rights. She was born in 1885 and was the first woman to run for president in El Salvador and Latin America. She was an advocate for her beliefs in anti-imperialism, feminism, and the reunification of Central America (Teaching Central America n.d.).

Livingston, Guatemala

The Garifuna Cultural Center is a vibrant center that is dedicated to the preservation and promotion of the rich and diverse Garifuna culture, traditions, and history. It is a focal point for various cultural activities, educational programs, and community events. The center's mission is to empower island families and share the captivating and impactful Garifuna culture with the global community (Tips 2021).

7 Altares in Livingston is a beautiful natural attraction with seven lovely pools, holds a deep historical significance as a ceremonial site for the Garifuna people. Visitors are warmly welcomed by a knowledgeable elder who shares the captivating history of the site. Other places to visit and eat in Livingston.

National Garifuna Day is a cultural festival celebrated in the main streets of Livingston. This event commemorates the arrival of the Garifuna on the Guatemalan Atlantic coast (Team). The parade features music groups in traditional Garifuna costumes and performances of various tribal dances. These dances are accompanied by drums, conch shells, maracas, and chants in the Garifuna language.

Tomas Sanchez, a community activist in Livingston, Guatemala, is a powerful defender of Garifuna rights. His journey from growing up in Belize and Livingston to returning to Livingston in 2001 and becoming deeply involved in community activism is an inspiring transition. He is an indigenous leader who transitioned from conflict involvement during the Guatemalan Civil War to advocating for justice and peace (“Garifuna” 2023).

Juan Carlos Sanchez has long promoted Garifuna culture in Labuga, also known as Livingston. His autobiography, *Palabra(s) de Ounagülei(s)*, offers an insider's perspective on Garifuna's life. "With a background in music that spans reggae, calypso, punta rock, and spiritual Garifuna music" (“Garifuna” 2023), Sanchez has played a vital role in reviving the traditional musical genre. He is also passionate about access to education and reducing violence in his community.

Conclusion and Reflection

The research across the six cities—Limón, Livingston, Panama City, Colón, La Ceiba, and San Miguel—reveals the complex but untold history and stories of Afro-descendant communities in Central America, which is marked by migration, resistance, and cultural resilience. Each city presents a unique narrative of how Afro-descendant communities have navigated colonial oppression, socio-economic challenges, and struggles for rights and recognition.

Our findings include how migration and displacement have constantly changed the people and culture of these cities. Resistance is a common theme, with different communities using various strategies like legal action, uprisings, education, and cultural preservation to fight against colonial and modern oppression. In these cities, Afro-descendants have battled not only

direct violence but also efforts to erase their culture, keeping alive traditions that define their identities.

This research is an essential part of Black Central American Studies. It focuses on the connected histories of Afro-descendant communities in the region. It shows how essential it is to give voice to Afro-descendants when discussing migration, colonialism, and resistance to fully understand Central American history. The findings highlight the importance of acknowledging the unique experiences of Afro-descendants, who have often been left out of national stories. Researching and reporting about these challenges, Black social movements, organizations, and people and their contributions, supports the BCA Project's aim to make Black Central American histories and cultures more visible and acknowledged and supports our ultimate goals of filling a long-existing gap in Caribbean Studies.

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