Words are powerful. They shape our concepts about self, community, nation, and the world. The ancestral roots of many African-descendant people in the Western Hemisphere are directly connected to the forced migration of millions of stolen African peoples. These people provided the labor needed to cultivate the terrain and build the fiscal infrastructure for future countries. All of Europe found some dimension of opportunity in this new frontier economy. The three dominant cultures were English-, French-, and Spanish-speaking nations. The Spanish-speaking nations spanned North, Central, and South America. *Black in Print* concentrates on the Central American isthmus comprising seven distinct countries, however, the author, Jennifer Carolina Gómez Menjivar, specifically hones in on three countries.

Gómez Menjivar interrogates what happened to the Afro-descendance of enslaved Africans. Her two principal questions are: Why has their destiny in the Central American Caribbean rimlands been markedly distinct from that of Black people in the Caribbean islands? And why are the stories about Blackness plotted in the Pacific coastal areas distinct from the stories charted. In seeking answers to these two questions, Gómez Menjivar uses geographical terms vis-à-vis plotting Afro-descendant communities across history, literature/print media, and region to explain the imposed invisibility and stratified ethnic communities within select Central American countries. Gómez Menjivar charges that “mainstream print media” cultivated a vertical relationship between Spanish-speaking communities along color, class, and ethnic lines, which firmly situated all things African/Black on the bottom, causing them “to disappear into home-grown mestizaje and then malignly reappear to divide and conquer the ‘decent people’ of Central America” (p. 4).

In concert with colonial mindsets, economic opportunities, and residential segregation, Gómez Menjivar argues that print media contributed to the disappearance of Central American Black experiences. In addition to national news sources,
literature, folklore, and other printed information historically marginalized and diminished Blackness. *Black in Print* is organized into three parts—“Pacific/Pacifico,” “Interior/Centro,” and “Caribbean/Caribe”—followed by a conclusion, appendix, notes, works cited, and index.

The three countries of interest are Nicaragua, Guatemala, and Honduras. There is mention of Belize, which is an English-speaking country that identifies as a Caribbean nation. The author lived with a family in Nicaragua and studied the Miskito language, which is spoken on the Caribbean coast and is an Afro-Indigenous form of communication. The larger population of Nicaraguans, regardless of complexion, was not interested in connecting with Afro-descendant people because of negative stereotypes that associated a “black” complexion with negative activities involving violence and drugs. Thus, all “black” people were subjected to perceived criminal tendencies and racialized geographic concepts, such as Jamaican, Creole, and Rastafarians, anything but Nicaraguan.

This nuanced belief about crime and colorism is pervasive throughout Central America. Gómez Menjivar seeks to situate the contemporary manifestation of “color-coding” within colonial roots where a caste system created “hierarchically arranged socioracial” statutes enforced by Spanish law to contain the miscegenated population (p. 2). Throughout the book, Gómez Menjivar places the mestizo/white complexioned people opposite Afro-descendant/black complexioned peoples. It is important to note that there are Indigenous people who blended with both European and African immigrants, creating new cultures and countries. Gómez Menjivar also informs the reader that the “color line” is not fixed, as in the United States. For example, there are dark complexioned people who maintain negative views of African-descendant people, culture, and history.

Central America is unique because the definition of African-descendant people shifts according to proximity to the Pacific Ocean versus the Caribbean Sea, thus the subtitle “Plotting the Coordinates of Blackness in Central America.” The geographic location of a country conflates Caribbean/African people separate from Spanish-speaking/Central American Latino people. The nations in the Caribbean Sea contain Jamaica, Cuba, and the Cayman Islands, largely full of Black African descendants and culture. In contrast, the Pacific Ocean shoreline is walled by the ocean and wedged between Spanish-speaking Mexico to the North and Columbia, Ecuador, and Peru to the South. The elements of African culture in South America remain hidden beneath the common Spanish-speaking culture almost completely underground. Thus, Indigenous cultures make the Afro-Latin experience barely visible or audible. The geography is compounded by the influence of European culture imported by Spain. Spanish colonists imported racial, colorist, and ethnic divisions that were integrated into foundational belief systems that resulted in slavery and caste systems firmly placing “black” and African people/culture on the bottom and outside of national identity in Nicaragua, Guatemala, and Honduras.

“Geography was a determining factor in the division of resources.... Terrain was conceptualized as having racial/ethnic/linguistic properties resulting in a homogenizing voice from the capital provinces.” The modern assumption that Afro-descendants were already part of the body politic allowed white Central Americans to “imagine Blackness as something outside of their nations and region” (p. 13). The “othering” of African-descendant people allowed for nationality to supersede ethnicity in terms of citizens. Moreover, African-descendant communities were relegated to undesirable geographical areas, such as low-lying land and costal areas that proved difficult to cultivate, and were subject to isolation from the mainstream of society and economically prosperous areas.

Of particular interest is the discussion on the Afro-Indigenous Garifuna community from Hon-
duras. During the construction of the Panama Canal and the business relationship with the United Fruit Company, the Garifuna were swept into the anti-Black sentiment along with West Indian workers. The Garifuna ancestral land was used by United Fruit at cost as banana plantations. When labor competition increased, Garifuna labor was replaced by mestizo and West Indian labor, resulting in ethnic strife within Honduran/Afro-descendant communities, exacerbated by the United States. Subsequently, the Garifuna were maligned and subjected to derogatory reporting from anthropologists, politicians, and businessmen. In the novel Barro (1951), Paca Nava de Miralda explored nationalism, race, and the Garifuna fictionally, capturing the zeitgeist of the Panama Canal era. The novel portrays national interest above all else, showing that the hierarchy should be mestizos above Garifuna who were above West Indians. The mestizos and Garifuna, both culturally Honduran, would supersede West Indians. Yet mestizos were above Garifuna in part because of their African heritage. In reality, the Garifuna are separate from respectable Honduran society through the use of “fictionally factual accounts” of people living on the Caribbean coastal strip (p. 80). Barro goes further by implying that Garifuna people were given to primitive spirituality and high birth rates. Gómez Menjivar states that “by deploying the binary opposites of civilization and barbarism that would be easily decoded by progressive readers, the narrative voice clearly establishes the Garifuna as wild elements, impeding a steady march to national progress” (p. 79). The novel relegates “Black bodies of the Garifuna to the margins” of Honduran society. The narrator of Barro succeeds in “invisibilizing the contributions of [Black] West Indians and highlighting the otherness of the Garifuna, [while making] a clear distinction between the ‘productive’ mestizo/white bodies and the ‘inefficient’ Black bodies in the Honduran Caribbean coastal landscape” (p. 81).

To the contrary is the shared history and border between Belize and Guatemala. David Ruiz Puga’s 1995 novel, Got seif de Cuin, explores the culture clash rising from “a British colonial past and binational border dispute [which] resulted in Belize’s invisibility in Central American literature.” Unlike Nicaragua and Honduras, Guatemala maintained a strong Maya culture that melded with Spanish colonial power, leaving no room for another ethnic identity. “Black people are de jure citizens and de facto foreigners in the Hispanicophone nations of the isthmus. The political disfranchisement of Afro-descendants from Guatemala is notable” (p. 112).

In closing, Black in Print is a complex read. At times, I needed to reread select passages to understand its meaning. Gómez Menjivar, however, develops her theory and proves that there were aspects in literature and print media that diminished the value of Afro-descendant people. Their ancestral roots, black skin, and Spanish language are not in isolation but in concert with their whole being. That reality is selectively visible and invisible when conditions of color provide the necessary antihero where crime, poverty, and a myriad of other deficits taint national identity in Nicaragua, Guatemala, and Honduras. Gómez Menjivar plots a course through the printed word in literature to situate “the multiple points of origin and articulation allotted for in the Black Central American experience” (p. 191). This book would benefit scholars in communication and literature, historians, and anthropologists. This work contributes to our expanding understanding of Black African experiences vis-à-vis trans-isthmus identity.
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