Radical Moves

Caribbean Migrants and the Politics of Race in the Jazz Age

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One Migrants' Routes, Ties, and Role in Empire, 1850s–1920s

If you were leaving your home on an eastern Caribbean island in the 1870s or 1880s, you were probably heading south. Perhaps you boarded an inter-colonial steamer in Bridgetown, your passage buying you the right to jostle for space on the open forward deck, amid scores of men and women from Martinique off to seek work at the gold mines of Venezuela. If a storm came up, as it often did, daybreak would find all of you unpacking boxes and bundles, hanging carefully stitched skirts and elegant hats out to dry before landfall in St. Vincent. Or perhaps you boarded the Royal Mail packet in St. George's, Grenada, looking up once more at the town layered in the curve of the volcanic crater, “rows of red-tiled roofs gleaming in the sun one above the other, nodding palms and flowering trees between them.” By afternoon you would reach the Gulf of Paria. The dark sierras of Venezuela spread to the right, the green mountains of Trinidad to the left. The rocky cliffs of the Dragos islets loom above on either side as your ship passes through to the gulf.¹

Then days or a week in Port of Spain, waiting for a returning cattle boat on which to purchase passage across the Gulf of Paria and up the muddy brown current of the mighty Orinoco River. Paddle-wheel riverboats claim the main channel; dugout canoes hug the mangrove-lined banks. Patois and English and Spanish sound around you on deck. In three days, Ciudad Bolivar appears, two-story commercial houses lining the riverfront, customs agents and porters (some from your very island) bustling to and fro. You might find room in a lodging house run by “a good old Barbadoes woman,” as one Englishman did in 1869. He was surprised by the conversations he heard, though you would not have been. Mother Saidy’s “was a sort of reunion for all the niggers from the British West India Islands,” he wrote, “where they met to discuss affairs private and political. It was most amusing to see what pride they took in being British subjects, and the contempt in which they held their dark brothers of the Main” (that is, Venezuela).² To this Englishman, the political opinions of black Caribbeans abroad seemed "amusing," no more. But sojourners’ allegiance mattered in this era, and not only to sojourners themselves.

This chapter introduces the places that came to form part of the circum-Caribbean migratory sphere and the people who made it so. Histories of
receiving-society enterprises that employed British Caribbeans in this era routinely refer to “imported Jamaican workers.” But to think of Caribbean sojourners as commodities imported by employers is inaccurate. The number of British Caribbeans traveling to any given destination under contract was always smaller than the number who made the trip at their own expense and under their own authority. Certainly, they went where employers wanted them. Labor-market disparities drove emigration: scarce options here, higher wages there. But migrants’ economic decision-making reflected an evolving social panorama shaped by those who went before. Transnational networks of kith and kin determined which opportunities would-be migrants heard about, what resources they could mobilize to get there, and who they could fall back on if plans went awry. Migration remade the human geography of the nineteenth-century Greater Caribbean because migrants made it so.

The mobile world that reached its zenith in the early 1920s had its origins three generations before, at the end of slavery. As Caribbean freedpeople and their children sought opportunity and autonomy, two fundamental strategies emerged to lessen dependence on the plantations where they or their parents had labored as slaves: people headed either into the hills or out to sea. Efforts in the first direction created what later scholars tagged “reconstituted peasancies,” as hundreds of thousands of Afro-Caribbeans turned to growing provisions and export crops (cocoa, bananas) on land they purchased, inherited, or held in common with extended family. The seaborne strategy began with small-scale and seasonal movement between adjacent islands or nearby territories. Separate migratory circuits developed in the eastern and western Caribbean, linking Barbados, Trinidad, Guiana, Venezuela, and the Windward Islands in the east and Jamaica and the rimlands of Central America and Colombia in the west.

As U.S. investment in infrastructure and export agriculture surged at the end of the century, movement intensified. Work on the Panama Canal under U.S. government control brought eastern and western circuits together for the first time: scores of thousands of Barbadians joined thousands of “small islanders” and over 100,000 Jamaicans who traveled to or through the isthmian port of Colón. Cuba’s interwar sugar boom created another wave of opportunity, drawing 150,000 or more British West Indians, mostly from the western Caribbean. The sugar plantations of the Dominican Republic drew eastern Caribbean migrants in a parallel process. Meanwhile, the expanding economies of the southeastern Caribbean set hundreds of thousands of migrants in motion—some from far away, like the many scores of thousands of South Asians who reached Trinidad and Guiana from British India under contracts of indenture; others from nearby, like the scores of thousands of Windward Islanders who traveled to and through Trinidad and Venezuela in the same years.

Relying on word of mouth, mails, money orders, and cheap deck passage, migrants kept in touch. In addition to kin ties, British Caribbeans created a rich associational life, founding churches, lodges, and mutual aid societies with branches across the region. Did they find the prosperity they sought? Migrants encountered or created a huge range of work relations. The degree of coercion they faced varied enormously, determined less by which nation they were in than by where they were within it. Port cities, squatting hinterlands, plantation zones, and jungle camps each offered a characteristic mix of opportunities and pressures. In order to understand why, we must look at the intersection of local politics and geopolitics, asking what laws and what logic governed sending- and receiving-state attitudes to the Afro-Caribbeans crossing their borders. Subsequent chapters will argue that interwar political shifts ruptured the circum-Caribbean migratory sphere, with intensely generative consequences. This chapter lays out what the “before” had come to look like, so that you will understand just how different the “after” was.

THE MAKING OF A MOBILE WORLD: CIRCUM-CARIBBEAN MIGRATION FROM THE MID-NINETEENTH CENTURY TO THE EARLY 1920S

The complexities of nineteenth-century migrations are well illustrated by the range of routes into and out of Venezuela, the Spanish-speaking nation that received more British West Indian immigrants than any other until construction of the Panama Canal under U.S. sponsorship began in 1904. In the Windward Islands and adjacent continental rimlands, the eighteenth century had seen borders move across people even more often than people had moved across borders. Imperial possession of these territories shifted back and forth, as France, Spain, Holland, and Great Britain vied for position on both the European continent and the Caribbean Sea. Only Barbados, with its flourishing sugar plantations well garrisoned, remained British throughout. Struggles against slavery—and the empires’ halting efforts to abolish or reimpose it—sent fugitive slaves or fearful slave owners across imperial borders as well. By the 1820s, Guadeloupe and Martinique were consolidated as French possessions; the other Windwards (Dominica, St. Lucia, St. Vincent, and Grenada), Trinidad, and Guiana (including Demerara, Berbice, and Essequibo) as British colonies; and the continental territory west of Guiana as the
now-independent Republic of Venezuela. Yet commercial circuits and family networks continued to cut across these nominal boundaries, and French patois-speaking Caribbeans of African ancestry moved with ease between Venezuela's northeast coast and the nearby islands. The coastal ports of Cumaná, Carúpano, and Güiria were all far easier to reach from Port of Spain than from Caracas, as was Ciudad Bolivar, the Orinoco River port through which all exports from Venezuela's western Andes, central plains, and southern jungles traveled to the Atlantic.3

Gold was discovered in the sparsely settled lands south of the Orinoco delta in 1849, the very year of the better-known California strike. Almost all of the eager prospectors and would-be entrepreneurs drawn to the strike's site, El Callao, were British West Indians. Some traveled overland from Guiana, others by sail from Grenada, St. Vincent, and the other Windward Islands to Port of Spain and then southward by steamer or sloop. By the 1890s, it was estimated that more than 7,000 Dominicans resided in Venezuela, while many more had gone and returned—this out of a total island population that remained under 27,000 in 1891.4 As gold mining and rubber tapping boomed and contracted in turn, the British Caribbean population in El Callao and points south and west topped 5,000, creating constant demand for provisions and supplies. British West Indian settlers around Ciudad Bolivar, similarly estimated at over 5,000 souls at the end of the nineteenth century, grew foodstuffs, raised mules, and profitably provisioned the camps to the south.5

In the same years, cocoa farming for export boomed on the Paria Peninsula to the north, pulling entrepreneurs and traders from locations as far afield as Corsica, Lebanon, and Spain. Carúpano, center of the cocoa trade, flourished. The first cable line between Europe and South America was anchored here in 1877 so that local buyers could adjust prices in line with the latest European market news. Those Paria residents who had arrived years before from nearby islands had often managed by the late nineteenth century to acquire smallholdings of their own and gain some prosperity as independent cultivators. Later arrivals more often found work as laborers on plantations owned by Corsican or Venezuelan merchants. Most of these British islanders, whether newly arrived or long resident, prosperous or poor, were Afro-descendant, patois-speaking men. In the same years, some 1,000 island-born women and men from Guadeloupe, Martinique, and the British Windwards labored as servants and artisans in Venezuela's capital, Caracas.6

Similar patterns of movement shaped the western fringes of Britain's Caribbean claims. Travel between Jamaica and Central America's Caribbean coast, long linked by the circulation of traders, turtlemen, and fugitives,
accelerated after the end of slavery in the 1830s. The building of a railway across Panama by U.S. investors in 1850 relied upon Jamaican laborers, as did the Ferrocarril de Costa Rica, built from Port Limón up to Costa Rica’s coffee-growing Central Valley in the 1870s. Abortive French efforts to build a canal across Panama in the 1880s drew scores of thousands from Jamaica to work on the diggings and scores of thousands more to seek opportunity in the boomtown service economy canal workers’ demand drove. Linked by bonds of empire and language to those running the show, Martinique and Guadeloupe, too, sent significant numbers to Panama in this era.

But it was not until canal construction resumed, under the aegis of the U.S. government, after 1903 that eastern Caribbean islands were linked to western Caribbean destinations in a significant way. The U.S. Canal Commission established its recruiting headquarters in Bridgetown in 1905. Some 20,000 Barbadian men left under contract for Panama over the next decade. Another 25,000 Bajans headed to the isthmus on their own dime in the same era, seeking their fortune outside the formal construction economy; perhaps half of these latter were women. Overall, nearly one-fourth of Barbados’s working-age men worked in Panama in this era.

Even during the exodus to Panama, the long-standing pattern of Barbadian emigration southward to Trinidad continued apace. The durability of highly specific migratory circuits is striking and utterly typical of what migration scholars have found for other places and times. People traveled to places where people they knew had already gone. In the years that St. Vincent and Grenada had sent many thousands to Venezuela, similar numbers of Barbadians had left instead for Trinidad (and smaller numbers for British Guiana and Brazil)—perhaps some 20,000 in the 1860s alone. The turn of the century found 14,000 Barbadians resident in and around Port of Spain; the population of Barbados’s own capital, Bridgetown, was under 13,000 at the time. Booming commerce to and through Port of Spain carried steady numbers of interisland hucksters and job seekers along on boats like the fifty-four-ton Wild Rover, which arrived from Bridgetown in November 1904 with a large cargo and forty-three passengers “packed like red herring in a box.” While many traveled back and forth over the course of a week, or a month, or a year, some stayed. Overall, in the two generations leading up to 1911, some 65,000 Windward Islanders relocated to Trinidad.

Just as Port of Spain served as transport hub and commercial center for the eastern Caribbean, Kingston and Colón did so in the west. Already by 1908, four different steamship lines used Kingston as the nexus for routes linking northern Venezuelan, Colombian, and Central American ports to New York.

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*Estimates from Malcolm J. Proudfoot, Population Movements in the Caribbean (Caribbean Commission Central Secretariat: Port of Spain, Trinidad, 1950), 20


Liverpool, Bristol, Havre, and Hamburg.11 The growth of the banana trade reinforced these connections and made two U.S. ports—New Orleans and New York—integral to western Caribbean circuits. The Boston Fruit Company exported bananas to Boston and New York from Jamaica, Cuba, and Santo Domingo; Minor Keith supplied the same cities from Limón, Bocas del Toro, and northern Colombia; and Sam Zemurray and the Vacarro Bros. shipped to New Orleans from Honduras, Nicaragua, and Guatemala. The first two combined to form the United Fruit Company in 1898 and absorbed the latter in 1929. Not only did the banana business employ scores of thousands of workers on plantations, rail lines, and docks, but the “Great White Fleet” that cycled fruit to northern consumers ensured continuous service between ports for first-class passengers and cut-rate “deckers” alike. One cluster of routes ran from Panama northward along the Central American coast to
New Orleans and back via Havana; another ran from Santa Marta to Colón to Kingston and Port Antonio to New York, and back via Santiago de Cuba or Haiti.13

Thus sitting at the crossroads of the Caribbean, Jamaica supplied the great bulk of English-speaking black migrants to Central America and Cuba, and roughly half of those to the United States as well. Demographers estimate that Jamaica saw a net loss of 146,000 people to emigration in the last two decades of the nineteenth century and first two decades of the twentieth century. The total number of Jamaicans migrating was far greater, since seasonal and short-term migrants are not counted in net figures.14

As Panama Canal construction drew to a close and war in Europe sent sugar prices sky-high, migrant streams shifted northward to the Greater Antilles. The cane harvests of eastern Cuba became a bonanza for laborers from around the region. Thousands of Caribbean immigrants left jobless in Panama boarded steamers bound for Cuba.15 Over 1,000 of the more than 7,000 British West Indians arriving in Cuba in 1916 reported that their last place of residence had not been their country of birth; in 1917 more than a quarter of the nearly 8,000 arrivals said the same.16 Movement from Jamaica directly to Havana and Santiago de Cuba was even more intense than that from the rimlands. Jamaican officials recorded 60,000 departures for Cuba between 1919 and 1921 (coming from a total Jamaican population of under 860,000). Even after sugar prices tumbled from their vertiginous heights in that latter year, Cuba continued to attract thousands of Jamaicans each harvest, alongside smaller but growing numbers from Britain’s eastern Caribbean colonies. Meanwhile, nearly 36,000 Haitians reached Cuba in 1920 alone, and migrants from Haiti would outnumber incoming British Caribbeans by at least 50 percent every year for the following decade.17

Both Jamaica and Barbados had sent small numbers of migrants north to Boston and New York from the 1870s onward, creating significant enclaves in each city by the turn of the century. As Panama Canal construction cycled Yankee dollars and ships through the Caribbean in unprecedented numbers, these small connections became large-scale migratory flows. The circuits then carried ever greater numbers northward as the Panama Canal workforce was demobilized beginning in 1913. Some 7,000 black immigrants to the United States in the first three decades of the twentieth century listed Central America as their last region of residence. The number of British West Indians who arrived after time spent in Cuba was even greater. In all, black immigration from the Caribbean to the United States averaged 3,500 per year from 1903 to 1913 and climbed to 5,000 per year from 1914 to 1923, dipping during the peak harvest years of the Cuban sugar boom and rising when opportunities in Cuba shrank.18

Those arriving were men like Sam Burke, who left Barbados to cut cane in Cuba and then stowed away on a sugar freighter bound for the Domino refinery in Brooklyn in 1921. Within a few years, he had met and married young Bajan Adriana Carlyle, whose own passage to New York to live with her brother Winston had been paid for with a second brother’s earnings in Panama. Sam and Adriana named their daughters Anita and Valenza Pauline to remind Sam of the Cuban Spanish he loved to hear, and they took in boarders—Clarice and Josephine, arrived from Barbados in 1923—to make ends meet. “White people like peas, and not one of them speaking the Queen’s English?” thought Adriana upon arrival, yet the brownstone Brooklyn world she and Sam and thousands like them created was intensely Barbadian, and therefore tightly tied as well to Trinidad, Cuba, and Panama. (Valenza Pauline would grow up to chronicle that world, writing under her married name, Paule Marshall.)19

One can track the shifting migratory circuits through the shifting origins of remittances sent home. In 1911 the total value of postal orders reaching Barbados from Panama was over three times that of orders from the United States. In 1916 money arriving from the United States outpaced that from Panama for the first time. By 1919 the total remitted from the United States was four and a half times larger than it had been in 1911, while the total

<table>
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<th>Net Emigration at Start of Period</th>
<th>Net Emigration to Panama</th>
<th>Net Emigration to Costa Rica and Others</th>
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* Figure covers 1881–1911
b Figure covers 1891–1911


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from Panama was one-fourth what it had been in that year.¹⁹ Emigration had become fundamental to Barbados's economy and demography alike. Despite declining death rates, the island population fell by 6 percent from 1891 to 1911 and a full 9 percent in the single decade from 1911 to 1921.²⁰

In the southeast Caribbean, British rather than U.S. investment drove growth. Trinidad's more than 120,000 East Indians (by 1921, less than a third of them foreign-born and the rest locally born to immigrant parents or grandparents) were the mainstay of sugar plantations.²¹ Similar numbers of East Indian immigrants and their descendants resided in British Guiana, farming rice or laboring in cane fields. New export enterprises depended on interisland circuits of labor supply. By 1921 the population of Trinidad included 17,000 Barbadians, 13,000 Grenadians, 10,000 Vincentians, and 7,000 other "small islanders"; British Guiana was home to 10,000 migrants from the same range of nearby origins.²² Oil production began in Trinidad near the La Brea "pitch lake" in the first years of the twentieth century. By the 1920s, more than 10,000 Trinidadians and Windward Islanders labored on Trinidad's southern oil fields.

A receiving society for small islanders and South Asians, Trinidad was increasingly also itself a sending society vis-à-vis the Spanish republic only seven miles to the west. The depleted gold veins around El Callao now saw only small-scale work with pick and shovel, the steam-driven pumps that had run continuously in the 1870s and 1880s silently rusting nearby. But cocoa farms large and small on the Paria Peninsula still prospered. British Caribbeans still found work, too, as boatmen along the Orinoco, as stevedores on the docks of La Guaira, and as servants and chauffeurs in the burgeoning capital, Caracas.²³ Between 1914 and 1917, U.S. and British companies found major oil fields south of Paria and around Lake Maracaibo in the west, triggering a maelstrom of camp construction that would provide employ for thousands more British Caribbeans (and hundreds from the French and Dutch islands) by the mid-1920s.²⁴

Migration to the United States was accelerating as well. In the United States as a whole in 1920, there were 50,000 Afro-Caribbean immigrants, living alongside some 55,000 of their U.S.-born children; a decade later, there were 72,000, with 83,000 U.S.-born children.²⁵ By 1930 one-third of the black populations of Manhattan (fundamentally, Harlem), Brooklyn, and Boston and two-fifths of those of Cambridge and Miami were made up of foreign-born blacks and their children.²⁶

Where did they hail from? By far the largest numbers came from Barbados and Jamaica, with Bajans slightly outnumbering Jamaicans in both New

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York and Boston—striking figures, given that Barbados's island population was one-sixth that of Jamaica in these years. A Barbadian paper estimated in 1925 that the island "receives 50 per cent more parcels from the USA than any other West Indian colony," and they may not have been far off. The third-largest group hailed from the Virgin Islands (purchased from Denmark in 1917, their residents granted U.S. citizenship in 1927). Trinidadians, Grenadians, Guianese, and Panama-born British Caribbeans appear in roughly equal numbers, each group perhaps one-sixth the size of either the Jamaican or Barbadian contingent. Leeward Island emigrants were few compared to the size of Manhattan but massive as a proportion of their sending societies: Antigua's population dropped by 8 percent between the 1911 and 1921 censuses, and St. Kitts-Nevis's by 12 percent. The distinct western and eastern Caribbean migratory circuits remained visible in New York. Some five-sixths of Jamaicans in New York lived in Harlem, but Barbadians split evenly between Harlem and Brooklyn, and Trinidian patterns hovered between the two.

Jamaica-born, New York-based journalist W. A. Domingo described Caribbean migrants there in 1925 as a "dusky tribe of destiny seekers... eyes filled with visions of their heritage—palm fringed sea shores, murmuring streams, luxuriant hills and vales" who "bring with them vestiges of their folk life—their lean, sunburnt faces, their quiet, halting speech... their light, loose-fitting clothes of ancient cut telling the story of a dogged, romantic pilgrimage to the El Dorado of their dreams." What Domingo's romanticized portrait of rural pilgrims in Gotham risks obscuring is the modernity and cosmopolitanism of the world from which British Caribbeans came. These "destination seekers" were former canal workers who had danced the tango in the polyglot dancehalls of Colón and Havana; returning veterans of the British West Indies Regiment, whose experiences in the Great War had made their second-class status within empire painfully clear; and other men and women making their first voyage "to foreign" but whose dreams—and demands—had been shaped by the stories such sojourners told.

SENDING MONEY, STRETCHING TIES: CREATING A CONNECTED CARIBBEAN

In large part, it was island elites' unwillingness to adjust to free labor—to offer workers enough wages to persuade them to work; to bargain rather than impose terms of housing or days—that pushed Caribbean working people abroad. But how free were the labor relations they encountered when they did so? There is no single answer. Not only did the power exerted by employers vary, but whether migrants even had an employer varied. Some British Caribbeans abroad did work for wages, whether in cane fields or oil fields, as a stevedore in Colón or a doorman in Manhattan. Others carved out small farms of their own along the coasts of Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama, Colombia, or Venezuela; others worked as artisans or entrepreneurs. Female migrants overwhelmingly concentrated in this last category, taking in laundry, selling savories and sweets, running boardinghouses or brothels. And even if we look only at work for wages—something most every man traveling circum-Caribbean circuits did at some point in his life—we see great variation.

Those workers who left home under contract were pledged to stay where sent until the price of passage was repaid. This was true for South Asians reaching Trinidad and Guiana under contracts of indenture, as it was for Jamaicans hired to labor on the Ecuadoran railroad and Barbadians contracted by the U.S. government for Panama. In all of these cases, accusations by workers that they were treated as slaves were not uncommon. Conditions at the destination tended to be vastly worse than recruiting agents had promised—the labor heavier, the hours longer, the food meager, and the wages scant once debts were deducted. Particularly in those cases where the destination was a distant railway camp or plantation frontier and employers controlled all transport in and out, "free" labor might be only nominally free.

Such circumstances were most common in the late nineteenth century, when much labor demand was for infrastructure projects cutting across sparsely settled terrain, and when arriving migrants were the first of their kind to reach each destination; they had no welcoming community of compatriots awaiting them. Even after circum-Caribbean circuits swelled and networks of knowledge and support expanded, for those laboring for the sole employer in an inaccessible spot, coercive debt peonage remained common. One sees the pattern in the 1916 case of two brothers who fled from the mangrove camps on the Orinoco delta, where a U.S. concessionaire manufactured charcoal from harvested wood. The brothers told authorities at Caripano that they had been cheated of wages and then beaten and had only barely escaped in a raft while overseers fired at them from the shore. Meanwhile, the company had telegraphed the same authorities to report that two insubordinate negros had tried to incite their fellow workers to revolt and then run off, and that the fugitives should be returned in chains to finish working off their debts. Each side, workers and employers, seemed quite confident authorities would agree that they were the aggrieved party. In this case, no record exists of who guessed right. But as late as 1928, Venezuelan rural police were reminding
contractors who held concessions for rubber extraction in the jungles west of El Callao to register the names of their workers at the start of each season, with the warning that if the paperwork was not filed in advance, “no request that workers be tracked down or obliged to work” would be heeded. The odds that authorities in Carúpano sided with the mangrove workers over their bosses seem low.

Note, though, that none of this depended on workers’ birthplace, skin color, or citizenship. Local Spanish-speaking working people faced debt peonage and employer abuses in all of these receiving societies as well. Indeed, by the 1920s most, though not all, of the crews collecting rubber and digging gold near El Callao were made up of Spanish-speaking Venezuelan nationals. For Spanish American citizens as for British Caribbean sojourners, travel to a remote work site was a gamble, a bet that wages promised would actually be paid and that exploitation would be bearable. The presence of competing employers, a nearby frontier offering a subsistence alternative, networks of support made up of friends or family from home: each of these raised the odds that workers might over the course of a laboring life come out a little ahead. To the extent that British West Indians in the Spanish-speaking circum-Caribbean could begin to rely on family lending rather than employer advances to pay for travel, could build communities in ports or railroad-line towns with easy access to cheap tickets out, and could access transnational social networks that opened doors elsewhere if local conditions got rough, they could be better off, on average, than the native-born workers around them—and sometimes they were.

At the individual level, there were successes and dashed hopes and everything in between, but overall the earnings of three generations of Caribbean men and women abroad made possible a slow expansion of opportunity for British Caribbean working people as a whole. And it did so in the teeth of island elites whose disinclination to raise wages or invest in public welfare remained unaltered. The Jamaican villages of Claude McKay’s childhood at the start of the twentieth century were home to men like Mr. Andry, who had “pushed up out of the black-and-brown peasant people and emigrated to Central America as a barelegged lad” on the pence he earned catching mongooses for bounty and returned after thirty years to buy the best farmland in the district; former schoolteacher Jabez Fearon, who returned from Panama “a changed man after being so long free from semi-religious duties, a little dapper with a gait the islanders called ‘the Yankee strut’; “the dwarfish baker Patton,” who beat all comers at wrestling “with the jiu-jitsu tricks he brought back from Colón”; and “shiny black Johnny Cross, who had arrived from Panama with eye-catching American-style suits and a gold watch and chains and rings of Spanish gold.”

Island cities, like villages, were transformed by migration. A clergyman visiting Port of Spain from Barbados in 1904 found himself in a cosmopolitan metropole suffused with small-town ties. Not only did everyone know each other, but everyone also knew him.

The population is a very mixed one, English, French, Spanish, Coo- lie, Hindustani, and last but not least, Barbadians are everywhere met with. Of the latter there are crowds. Some twenty greeted me on my arrival, many of them men and women who said I had baptised them and seemed quite surprised that I did not recollect them. I had to remind them that when I performed that interesting ceremony for them, they were slightly different looking animals from what they are today. Many of them seemed to have dropped upon their feet. Clerks in stores, policemen, car conductors, and drivers are many of them from the place where flying fish abound.

Bajans “dropped upon their feet” in Panama as well in the years when canal construction was booming and there was demand for services of all kinds. More than £83,000 in postal remittances reached Barbados from Panama in 1910 alone, and close to the same amount was transmitted through alternate routes. Eric Walrond (himself born in British Guiana to a Barbadian mother and raised in Colón in the heyday of canal work) shows us the motley crowd at the British consulate in Colón. First in line was a “Negress who owned a fried fish and muffins stand on the Wharf Aux Herbes,” who emptied twenty pounds in gold coins out of a dirty blue handkerchief onto the counter, along with a passbook to a Jamaican bank account, for the consul to process her deposit. Friendly societies and insurance providers like the Jamaica Burial Scheme likewise served as vehicles for transnational savings and transfers.

Ties and institutions that spanned multiple sites mattered a great deal to migrants’ options, and migrants brought them into existence. With astonishing speed, British Caribbeans founded fraternal lodges, mutual aid societies, communities of worship, and English-language newspapers in Panama, Costa Rica, and elsewhere. Island branches of British fraternal orders as well as U.S. Afro-American fraternal orders abounded. The Independent United Order of Mechanics, the Loyal Order of Ancient Shepherds, the Lebanon Foresters, the Grand United Order of Odd Fellows, and the Independent Benevolent Order of Elks had chapters across the region, as did island-specific mutual
associations from the Grenada Benevolent Society to the Sons and Daughters of Barbados.\(^{39}\)

Newer than any of these, yet growing fastest of all, was the “Universal Negro Improvement Association” that a Jamaican migrant named Marcus Garvey founded in Kingston in 1914 and reestablished in New York three years later. The UNIA was a product of the migratory sphere. By 1914 Garvey had worked in Costa Rica, Panama, Ecuador, and England. It was the experience of seeing black people exploited in such similar ways in such different places, he would later say, that inspired him. His cofounder (and future wife) was the teenage Amy Ashwood, herself raised in Panama and only recently returned to Kingston. The organization they created combined global mission—“Africa for the Africans, at home and abroad”—with concrete local ties. Each chapter held weekly meetings, exhorted members to solidarity and self-help, and made newcomers welcome. Its spread offers a precise map of where migrants were. Within a decade, the UNIA had fifty-two chapters in Cuba, forty-seven in Panama, thirty in Trinidad, twenty-three in Costa Rica, eleven in Jamaica, eight in Honduras, seven in British Guiana, six in Colombia, five in Guatemala, five in Nicaragua, four in Barbados, two in the Canal Zone, and one in El Callao, Venezuela.\(^{40}\)

Because social networks shaped flows and voluntary associations integrated new arrivals, this highly mobile world was anything but anonymous. Upon arrival in Baraguá, Cuba, two Jamaican laborers who had joined the Salvation Army in Panama began preaching Open-Air Meetings, built a wooden “Salvation Centre,” and wrote to Salvation Army headquarters in Kingston for support.\(^{41}\) The officer who was sent in response to the request reported: “I met in Cuba comrades from every [Salvationist] Corps I have been stationed at in the West Indies and on the Isthmus of Panama.”\(^{42}\) In a parallel vignette from the eastern Caribbean circuit, when Salvation Army brigadier Charles Smith visited the Dominican Republic in 1928 (in response to the petitions of one Hester O’Neal, who had rallied fellow Salvationists she found there from Barbados, St. Kitts, Antigua, and St. Thomas to begin preaching on the plantations), he “discovered among the dear people many of my own Converts and Soldiers of the Leeward and Windward Islands.”\(^{43}\)

A woman far from home, Hester O’Neal was not unusual. In the boomtown ports, opportunities for female earnings abounded. Women sold sweets or fruit on the docks; rented out rooms and cooked for boarders; offered companionship for cash or for love.\(^{44}\) Though men outnumbered women among emigrants from every island, still scores of thousands of women left their home islands in this era. Some women traveled with male partners or to join them; others traveled with or to female kin or companions. Some women left children behind with relatives or placed as servants; others brought infants and children along.\(^{45}\)

Large-scale migration was made possible by, and in turn reinforced, a flexible and fluid kinship system. By this era, “child-borrowing” had become a standard component of Caribbean kin practice, and it was common for children to be raised in households that included neither their mother nor father.\(^{46}\) Miss D. was born around the turn of the century; her father died in 1914, and she had to raise her half siblings when their mother “did go foreign. And after she go foreign, she came back. She sick. She sick and dead, so me had to help mine the littler ones dem.”\(^{47}\) With many mouths to feed, even remittances from abroad might only cover school materials for a few years. Lucky boys might be apprenticed, girls sent into unpaid service to “learn” salable skills. “And sometimes,” Miss D. reported, “they send them abroad after

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them get complete." Some wrote home on a regular basis, she explained, sending letters through the local parson if their parents could not read. "Plenty of them help them parents. And plenty die. And plenty never remember them parents. All various ways it go you nuh know."

Those who wanted to remember could manage to keep connections alive over long distances and long years. Joshua Howell and his half brother left Kingston for New Orleans in the mid-1880s. Howell died in New Orleans in 1935, leaving "a small interest in some property," and his attorney wrote from there to the U.S. consul in Kingston for help. "Howell used to say that he had a sister and a brother back in Jamaica but whether or not they are living now, no one here knows. . . . They are colored people." The consul published a note in the Kingston press, and within weeks the attorney had heirs to spare. "I am now in touch with eight or nine nieces and nephews of the decedent, who saw the ad and at once wrote me about their relationship to him. There can be no doubt of their being the right people because they have sent me letters in Howell's handwriting, written from here, which I recognize to be his hand." Over the half century that Joshua Howell had lived in New Orleans, his brother and sister and their children had stayed in touch. Not only were letters written; letters were saved.

In sum, migrants—those who returned and those who kept going, those who sent help and those who were never heard from again—remade the geography of the Greater Caribbean in the first decades of the twentieth century. Their physical labor altered infrastructure and ecosystems, carving canals, laying rail, felling rain forest. Just as important, their social labor remade the routes along which knowledge, people, and resources traveled, tying villages to ports and ports to each other in networks of connection that cut across imperial and national lines.

CAPTURING CITIZENS AND CLAIMING SUBJECTS: THE CONSEQUENCES OF GEOPOLITICS FOR MIGRANTS ABROAD

I argued above that during the rise of the circum-Caribbean migratory system, the labor position of British Caribbeans abroad was not systematically worse than that of workers native to the lands where they sojourned. Like locals, they were highly vulnerable to employer abuses. As with locals, their friends, their feet, and occasionally their fists were the best guarantors they had. Like locals, foreigners might hope that if they escaped the mangrove swamps and reached Carúpano, authorities might take their side against abusive bosses. And like locals, in thus seeking allies among officials, they would sometimes get lucky and sometimes not.

The context of work negotiations was shaped by migrants' position vis-à-vis multiple agents of the multiple states their lives spanned: London bureaucrats, colonial governors, British consuls, local police, municipal officials, regional caudillos, national leaders. Crucial to understanding migrants' experiences, then, are the logic and incentives of the international political system and the patterns of local politics. Together, these determined just what particular authorities would be willing to do for whom.

Territorial boundaries were anything but fixed in the era when our story began, and that matters a great deal. Imperial borders had shifted back and forth over the heads of Caribbean people multiple times in the eighteenth century. Nineteenth-century frontiers remained particularly ill-defined in those zones where, during the colonial period, indigènes, maroons, and other fugitives had managed to fend off the full grip of any one empire: Central America's Caribbean lowlands in the west and the jungles of the Guianas in the east. After independence, conflicting claims to these lands by the new Spanish American republics and the British Empire rested in part on the ability of each to prove that the local populace recognized their sovereignty and sought their protection. Rather than depicting dark-skinned foreign speakers in the borderlands as alien outsiders, then, Crown and congressmen alike espoused an expansive vision of who could become subject or citizen.
As island-born migrants found themselves caught up in Venezuelan civil wars over the first decade of the twentieth century, disputes between the British Foreign Office and the Venezuelan chancellery played out with each government reaching to claim sojourners as their own—even against sojourners’ will. Venezuela passed laws that nationalized immigrants automatically after a few years’ residence; Great Britain instructed migrants to ignore the law and insisted on diplomats’ sovereign right to protect British subjects abroad whatever their color, language, or station and with or without documentation. This nominal stance did not translate into expedient and color-blind service from British consuls for Grenadians, Barbadians, or Vincentians abroad. But it provided migrants with a lever, and they used it.

From the moment gold was discovered in El Callao, local authorities began jostling for position for themselves and the states they represented. In 1849 the Venezuelan governor of Guayana state wrote to his superiors in Caracas denouncing the local British consul, who “wishes to act like the magistrate here for subjects of his country.” The consul fired off a self-righteous reply, accusing the governor of stripping sojourners’ legitimate right to bear arms and of wielding the term extranjero—“foreigner”—as if it were an insult. The core question, of course, was just who would turn out to be foreign here. The demarcation line between British Guiana and the Republic of Venezuela might fall on either side of the gold fields, depending on which state could make its claim effective. The dispute was fought out through diplomacy and then arbitration for the next half century. It all came down to what people were here, and whose people they were. As Venezuela’s U.S.-based lobbyist stressed in 1896, by Great Britain’s own confession, the British claim had “no basis but occupation.” Approximately none of the purported subjects on whom Britain’s claim to “occupation” rested were of English ancestry, and more would have spoken French patois or indigenous languages than English creole, much less standard English.

In 1850 the same Venezuelan governor who had denounced the British consul’s assertions with regard to “subjects of his country” urged superiors in Caracas to block the entry of further libertos de las Antillas—“Caribbean freedmen”—to the territory. Since race-based arguments for immigration restriction would be so common three generations later, it is worth pausing to note the argument he made. This was not about blood or biology but about character, power, and international consequences. Caribbean freedpeople were known to be “haughty, immoral, accustomed to vagrancy”—there was “no guarantee that they would submit to Venezuelan laws or authorities.” A few thousand would be enough to “keep the entire Republic in alarm,” not only because as “a mass with no partisan loyalty they could add to any domestic unrest” but also because “the specter of international demands [reclamaciones] would be constant. Do not doubt it! For we have our own painful experience, and can observe too the experience of other weak nations subject to the whim of the powerful. Concretely, powerful England has inspired terror for her recent claims [pretensiones] against Greece, which all Europe has denounced, as well as her acts against our own lesser authority.”

This reference to Greece was not happenstance, and that it sprang to the mind of this Venezuelan governor points to the centrality of the high politics of imperial representation to the reception of Caribbean migrants. What happened in Greece had resonated across Europe—and, as we will see in chapter 4, would remain a touchstone for British Caribbean thinkers in a very different geopolitical moment eighty years later. It was the case of Don Pacífico.

Don Pacífico was a Portuguese-speaking Jew, born in Gibraltar and thus a British subject, whose properties were attacked by an Athenian mob in 1847. When his efforts to gain redress through Greek courts failed, he appealed to Great Britain for help; Foreign Secretary Palmerston sent warships to seize Greek ships to compensate Pacífico’s claims. Defending his action, Palmerston exhorted Parliament to “fully [recognize] the Right & Duty of the Government to secure to Her Majesty’s subjects in Foreign States the full Protection of the Laws of those States.”193 His was an expansive version of both the sphere and the who of British rights. The attributes of a subject should inhere wherever the subject went and whoever the subject was. The question, Palmerston insisted in closing, was “whether, as the Roman, in days of old, held himself free from indignity, when he could say Cives Romanus sum; so also a British subject, in whatever land he may be, shall feel confident that the watchful eye and the strong arm of England, will protect him against injustice and wrong.”

Both the facts of the case and the words of the speech underlined the tenet that subjects’ entitlements should hold regardless of rank, birthplace, ancestry, or culture. Palmerston denounced those critics who had “treated jocosely” the claims of impoverished Maltese, Ionians, and others who had sought redress for Greek abuses. British parliamentarians had roared with laughter “at the poverty of one sufferer, or at the miserable habitation of another; at the nationality of one injured man, or the religion of another; as if because a man was poor he might be bastinadoed and tortured with impunity; as if a man who was born in Scotland might be robbed without redress; or, because a man is of the Jewish persuasion, he is fair game for any outrage.” Palmerston insisted that his vision of rights to which British subjects were universally

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entitled, and which they could make universally effective, matched "the principles...held by the great mass of the people of this country." To judge by public reaction at the time, he was right. As one historian concludes: "Few sympathized with Pacifico himself, yet almost everyone applauded the evocation of the 'civis Romanus sum' principle."

It was barely two weeks after Palmerston's speech that the governor of Guayana urged his superiors to bar West Indian freedmen from Venezuela—and leaked a copy of that letter to the press. Britain's chargé d' affaires in Caracas fired off a response. From the moment of emancipation, the freedpeople of the Caribbean had "acquired a perfect right to due protection from their Government," a right that was in no way diminished by their "color," their "former status," or "the meagerness of their resources and condition." "Her Majesty's Government will never permit any foreign state, on the pretext that they were once slaves, to administer to them justice in any measure different" from any other British subjects.

The logic of expansion of the Roman Empire had insisted that populations of distinct ancestry, language, and religion could be absorbed into a functioning whole. The nineteenth-century adjudication of former Spanish fringes rewarded similar faith. For the new republic of Venezuela to claim the Orinoco delta and Guayana rain forests as her own, she would have to claim their inhabitants as potential citizens. The claim to territory rested on evidence of popular allegiance. If that populace was nonwhite, so be it. The state that could claim them as belonging to its political community could claim their lands for its sovereign domain.

So, for instance, Lord Salisbury argued in 1880 that if Britain were to yield to Venezuela's proposed demarcation with Guiana, it "would involve the surrender of a province inhabited by 40,000 British subjects." Venezuelan spokesmen scoffed. On the contrary, Venezuela's U.S. lobbyist argued that even the heart of the gold-mining region contains no settlements even today. The [mines] are worked exclusively by negroes, who are hired on the coast and go up for three months at a time. There are no homes there, for they live in huts built in the Indian fashion or mere shanties, and no families and no permanent residents, unless that term be applied to a few negroes who have kitchen gardens, and perhaps a few foremen or officials whose duties keep them there. The repetition of the racial label underlines the implicit argument. Surely these negroes could not be those subjects?

British commentators, in contrast, insisted that the people of the disputed borderlands were numerous, settled, and full subjects of the Crown. Promoter William Barry made a fact-finding trip from London in 1886. "The present population of the mines is principally composed of English subjects," he reported, "and all would hail gladly, and support energetically, a union with British Guiana or an independent state with free trade. If this country is opened up as Australia was, and similarly populated with an English speaking race, the [British] Government will be forced to interfere for the protection of its own subjects." That the "English subjects" currently comprising the mines' population were not imitation Australians but Caribbeans of color is left as hazy as grammar allows. But Barry later made explicit that the subjects the Crown was duty-bound to defend were Caribbean: "The great influx of English subjects from Jamaica, and the other islands, and now, the persistent pressing forward of prospectors, in large numbers from Demerara will in time compel the English Government to take active steps to protect their own subjects, and to enforce their treaty rights." The editors of Jamaica's Daily Gleaner argued likewise that the gold rush "rendered necessary the extension of British protection to the numbers of British subjects who flocked to the El Dorado from Trinidad and Demerara."

Violence at the gold camps strengthened the claim that British expansionism was mere duty-bound protection of their own. In a letter to the Port of Spain Gazette, an English former mine supervisor decrying the "nearly daily" murders of British subjects in El Callao. "Where is the oft-sung freedom of British subjects to travel where and when they wish, if on the frontiers of English Guiana and scant miles from Trinidad they are sacrificed at whim by Venezuelans?" The author of this call to arms was Albert Nicholson, former head of one of El Callao's mines. At a moment of high tension in the zone, Nicholson had raised the British flag over his camp, then hauled it down as Venezuelan troops arrived to put down the strike turned secessionist movement. Nicholson fled, and the British West Indian laborers who had supported him found themselves in shackles. The Gleaner editors, usually no fans of labor resistance, for once urged British Caribbeans to use force to enforce their rights: "In case the Venezuelans should attempt any armed demonstrations, the diggers, British and American, as many of them are, can be trusted to render a good account of the Venezuelan army." William Barry concurred. The "miners have already on one occasion attempted to take up arms against abuses, and "but for the incapacity and cowardice of their leader, who first provoked the outbreak"—that would be Nicholson—"they could successfully have resisted all interference." Combative colored subjects here looked far better than pusillanimous white ones.

Relations remained tense in the region, with miners subject to forced exactions by venal officials and pressed into armies when warring factions
swept through during the era’s frequent civil wars. Yet it seems clear that the potential attention of arbiters far away, and the presence of British consuls eager to intervene with regard to “their” people—in order to reinforce the claim that those people were truly full subjects of the Crown—made a difference. Coercive labor arrangements were less common than they might have been, and wages were higher as a result. One Englishman who worked as a mine boss during the 1880s gold boom wrote with grudging respect, “All the miners were niggers from the islands, not easy to manage, and asking absurd wages—I have heard of eighteen shillings a day.” Later travelers concurred that this was a place where the scarcity of labor actually translated into worker bargaining power. The only employees to be had were “West Indian coloured settlers and immigrants, often of a very low type, so that it is necessary to pay B 6.00 per day for the lowest class of unintelligent manual labour, and up to B 16.00 for skilled.”

Events from 1906 show that workers could gain some leverage even in precisely the circumstances I have described above as most consistently disempowering: travel under contract to a specific employer, to an isolated spot, in a land where local authorities routinely used force on behalf of local employers. Nine British recently arrived workers wrote from El Callao to the governor of Trinidad that conditions at the half-derelict mine were nothing like what they had been promised back in Port of Spain: “Men are killed and mutilated every week.” They had been promised aboveground carpentering work, appropriate to their skills and paid by the day; on arrival, they were forced to work underground and were paid by depth drilled: “if we drilled only four or five inches we would get nothing.” The overseer refused to let them seek better conditions in a different mine; they were still under contract of debt, he alleged, and sent police to force them back to work at gunpoint. They continued to protest; the overseer had them jailed for three days.

The workers’ complaints got high-level attention. The governor wrote to the Foreign Office in London and the Foreign Office to the British minister in Caracas. The British minister wrote a personal note to the Venezuelan minister of foreign relations, urging that instructions be sent to “Local Authorities” to resolve complaints in the zone and underlining the “gloomy picture of [workers’] sufferings” the Trinidadian governor had confirmed. The British minister also dispatched the British consul at Ciudad Bolivar, C. H. De Lemos, on the multiday journey by boat and mule train to El Callao. The workers wrote again to Trinidad from El Callao, describing the “misery, the hardest of tasks,” and the further abuses by police and magistrate they had faced once released from jail to work off their debt. One worker fell deathly ill; the company said it was no problem of theirs, and the man would have died but for the “kind people of our race and subjects lend[ing] a helping hand in giving to the sick man and others a morsel of bread.” Finally, advances repaid and freedom regained, they returned to Trinidad and complained to the governor in person. He wrote to the Foreign Office to reiterate his conviction of their “absolutely indefensible” treatment and the need for just recompense.

In his eventual report, Consul De Lemos openly distinguished among British subjects in ways the public rhetoric of the imperial government strenuously avoided. “I found that the whites have at present no complaints whatever,” he wrote, “and that the coloured subjects with a few individual exceptions are also at present quite satisfied.” The latter, Colonial British subjects of the West Indies,” numbering some 5,000 to 6,000, were on balance glad to be there and earning. Doubtless some of the workers’ complaints were justified, although De Lemos believed some ill treatment had been “provoked by want of discretion and unruly and impudent conduct” by the workers.

De Lemos assured his superiors that after a few days of conflict, the men in question had been let out of jail, had paid off their passage, and had even prospered: “They seem to have earned quite a substantial sum of money within a short period as, according to the two men interviewed by me, eleven out of the twenty originally imported had by December 24 already returned to Trinidad at their own expense and no doubt all of them carried money with them.” By January the British minister in Caracas reported to his superiors at the Foreign Office that the mines were quiet and several thousand British West Indians were busily at work. Clearly, the conditions under which some migrants labored in El Callao were wretched. Equally clearly, the position of British Caribbean migrants as the leading edge of Britain’s territorial claims gave workers leverage to gain a hearing, and they used it as best they could.

In a world in which foreign nationals carried the backing of foreign states, receiving-society governments might prefer to naturalize sojourners, turning aliens with allies into sons of the soil—of whom much could be demanded with impunity. Military impressment, in particular, was an ongoing issue. During the 1903 British blockade, explained a British official in Caracas in a private note to superiors, “recruiting for the Venezuela army was very active, and practically all Venezuela labourers and artisans seem to have been impressed. Among these would, no doubt, be many negroes.” Some of these were now claiming redress as British subjects. “None of these men have any proof of British nationality. They come to Venezuela without any sort of papers, and in consequence, but for their assertion, there is no
proof whatever of their origin, so that, in case of general conscription in time of war, the Venezuelan officers can hardly be blamed for taking them.” For public consumption, however, the British stance was that all self-proclaimed British subjects’ rights to imperial protection were absolute—a necessary posture, given that the Crown’s “duty” to support British subjects had been Great Britain’s declared justification for the 1902–3 blockade of Venezuela on behalf of jilted London bondholders.

The logic of pulling resident foreigners into the subordination of citizenship reached its apex with Venezuela’s Ley de Extranjeros of 1903, which mandated automatic naturalization after twenty-four months of residence. The law was careful not to offer new political rights that might give those naturalized some political scope in their new nation. The British minister in Caracas marveled at the audacity.

The Law appears to be an attempt on the part of the Venezuela government to deprive foreigners within the territories of the republic, as soon as they have been in the country for two years, of their nationality of origin, and of the advantages which that nationality might confer, without giving them any option or election in the matter, or any complete national status in exchange for that which they will lose. It rigorously excludes them from any share in the public life of Venezuela . . . and compels them, on pain of expulsion, to agree to bear all the burdens that Venezuelans have to bear (except military service and forced loans during revolutions) and to forego resort to diplomatic intervention.

Foreign Office staff fell over themselves citing treaties to which Venezuela was signatory that the proposed law violated. It was simply unacceptable. The British minister made a formal “general protest against the law as a whole” to the Venezuelan president, and British consuls and sojourners alike were instructed to ignore its provisions.

For a decade, no effort was made to implement the 1903 law’s controversial mandate. But in 1914 the Venezuelan government began to demand not only passports or visas but also certificates of good conduct for entry, alleging the authority of the 1903 law. The Foreign Office instructed consuls in Venezuela to tell arriving British Caribbeans that Venezuelan authorities had no grounds to demand such a certificate. Venezuelan authorities also tried to require entering foreigners to sign a declaration ceding all right to call on British representatives in case of dispute; the Foreign Office insisted that “His Majesty’s Government did not recognize the right of” Venezuela to remove British subjects’ rights, signature or no signature. As late as 1914, then, the Foreign Office sought to maintain the maximal interpretation of how tightly the right to imperial protection and prerogative of cross-border mobility adhered to British subjects abroad—even colonial subjects of color.

**CONCLUSION**

The workers from Trinidad concluded their second petition from El Callao to the British minister: “Most respectfully Sir should we be left in the hands of these people we will be no more Britons and surely we know wherever a grief are our Government is ready to share its power.” Similar rhetoric filled petitions to British consuls in Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Panama alike, in this era and subsequently. Did the workers really have faith in empire’s embrace? By the late 1920s, the notion that the British government would treat black emigrants’ travails as a call to arms—that there was such as thing as “our Government . . . ready to share its power”—was so transparently false that jokes about British Caribbeans being not “British subjects” but rather “British objects” became wry standards within émigré communities. But in 1906, in an international context in which Great Britain still sought to extend empire’s domain on the basis of empire’s subjects’ inviolate rights, the words had some pull.

Another vignette from northeast Venezuela less than a decade later offered a rumbling of things to come. It also confirmed common knowledge of certain key facts: that migrants’ degree of vulnerability abroad depended in part on the stance of their sending state and that sending-state commitments depended on race (even if parliamentary perorations denied it) and were highly vulnerable to shifting metropolitan priorities. In 1914—as the Great War convulsed Europe—an exile invasion threatened the Gómez regime. Led by the Ducharne family, whose money had been made in cacao and trade on the Paria Peninsula, rebels sailed from Trinidad to the eastern tip of the peninsula and used it as their rebellion’s base. When government troops rettook the area in 1915, they were merciless with locals thought to have supported the rebels. Scores of Trinidadian, Grenadian, and Vincentian workers were whipped or beaten, their goods were seized, and their houses were burned. A Trinidadian doctor examining two decades later one Joseph Mitchell, arrested in this moment, found that Mitchell’s body still bore “scars and signs” from the torture he had suffered—beaten with the flat of a sword, forced to wear “grillos” on both legs, and “put in the Tortol” for 15 minutes, that is, hung “by his testicles with a rope tied around it.”
Some men escaped to Carúpano on foot and sought out the British consul and Venezuelan civilian officials to plead for help for those, like Mitchell, still imprisoned. They reported that the Venezuelan troops beating them had laughed at their pleas and protests: "The troops told us that the British Government is currently too busy to worry about a bunch of negros and that if we think we can get any reparation that we should go ahead and try." And indeed, the British government was very busy sending young Britons and Canadians to their deaths in Flanders fields and on Gallipoli's shores; and indeed, the abused colonials' complaints yielded few results, despite the local consul's efforts.

This chapter began by looking at the macroeconomic and technological shifts that generated demand for workers in new places in and around the Greater Caribbean in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. We saw that evolving practices of community and kinship made it possible for islanders to move outward, making the most of the earnings opportunities that new investment in transport, bananas, and sugar opened. We then shifted to examine a different context that also shaped migrants' position: the expansive ambitions of a British Empire aiming to consolidate its rimland presence in the wake of Spanish American independence. Particularly in the mineral-rich borderland of Venezuela and Guiana, immediate interests as well as the broader principle were at stake. Where territorial boundaries would be drawn depended in part on the ability of rival states to demonstrate residents' historic and ongoing allegiance. Against this backdrop, British Caribbeans abroad could leverage some support from their status as full-fledged British subjects, and states (both sending and receiving) understood emigrants' "rights" as a key component of their own geostrategic maneuvering.

TwO Spirits of a Mobile World
Worship, Protection, and Threat at Home and Abroad, 1900s–1930s

The sound of prayer is everywhere in firsthand accounts of the circum-Caribbean migratory sphere. Crowded decks echoed with supplications when seas grew rough and rung with hosannas as ports drew near. "Every time you hear a bell [in Cuba], is Salvation Army or a [Garveyite] talking about Africa," remembered one Jamaican returnee. If you paused at every Port of Spain housefront where cries of worship could be heard, you would never get home at night—or so quipped a judge in 1920 as he sentenced five women to hard labor for holding a "Shouter" revival. Ira Sankey's Methodist hymnal was part of the kit of every decker, and in every port, stevedores sang Sankey hymns as they worked. The sound of Bocas del Toro at night, wrote British traveler Winifred James, was "half a hundred niggers singing the bananas into the holds and talking religion in between the loads."

Salvation mattered deeply in this place and time, and theology was too important to leave to the professionals. The boatmen piloting Anglican bishop Herbert Bury in and out of mangrove swamps along the Central American coast engaged him in solemn religious debate for hours every night under the stars. The first known publication by Marcus Garvey is a letter to the Times in Limón, Costa Rica, written while he worked on a nearby banana plantation in 1911. It dealt neither with race nor politics but with the "pseudo gospel pounders" currently drawing crowds in Port Limón. (Garvey had no sympathy for the local Bedwardites and "mial men"—two Afro-Jamaican Revival groups—but he leapt to defend the Catholic Church as a "glorious institution."). Why were there so many gospel pounders? This was a world in which common people took seriously the responsibility to listen for messages from God and to preach themselves if that was what dreams, visions, or intellect guided them to do. A Barbadian character in the Trinidad Weekly Guardian's humor column explained the prevalence of street preachers in an immigrant neighborhood of Port of Spain thus: "Alyuh Bajans alwis waun fuh put moh exerpertashuns pun de scriptures and dat's why dose prophets dus live down dey so." "Putting more interpretations upon the Scriptures" was a right and a duty for locals and sojourners alike. The circum-Caribbean migratory sphere was a space of constant religious creation.