“¡Los gringos vienen!” focuses on the ways a particular Afro-Latin community in Portobelo, Panama, who call themselves and their performance tradition “Congo,” negotiate encounters with global tourists. In so doing, it links notions of “respectability” with double-consciousness to explore differences between female Congo “local” and “like-local” performances. “Like-local” names Congo “packaged” presentations intended primarily for global tourists who enter Portobelo by bus or boat for one- to two-hour mid-day excursions. “¡Los gringos vienen!” attends to a doubling of the gaze whereby the Congos watch tourists watching them and annotate their cultural practices accordingly.

KEYWORDS: Afro-Latin, black diaspora performance, critical ethnography, Portobelo Panama, Congos, tourism

It is the Saturday night before Ash Wednesday, and we are leaning, body-to-body on the walls of the palenque, a seven-hundred-fifty square foot temporary space with a thatch roof supported by wooden beams. A three-foot-high railing connects the beams with two cattycorner entryways. More thatch has been used to fill in the “walls” below the railing. Pressing against the wooden frame and rocking the walls is a crowd of multi-brown bodies three rows thick. Even the sparse “white” bodies register faintly brown thanks to the dry season’s relentless sun. Uncles, aunts, grandmothers, daughters, godsons, neighbors, visitors, friends, clapping, rocking, pointing, laughing, and cheering, make the small space more intimate. Inside, Simona starts a new song, clapping the rhythm she wants the three male drummers to follow, “Micaela, Micaela, yo no bailo contigo morena.” The rhythm of her hands is slow, marking every third beat. After one verse, the chorus—older women dressed in polleras with flowers in their hair and younger ones in blue jeans or shorts, hair pulled tight in ponytails—echo her clapping in time, “Micaela, Micaela, yo no bailo contigo la ple- na.” The rap, tap, tap of the center drum smacks the others awake and matches the women’s rhythm. Simona raises her voice high and, without altering the rhythm of her singing, speeds up her hands to two claps per beat. The drummers follow in time as does the chorus. A very skilled Congo woman in her early twenties wearing fitted jeans and a halter top slips out of her sandals and transfers her weight from side to side, matching the rhythm of the music. The drumbeats rise to meet the pitch of the singing and the young woman enters the space with a twirl. Standing in front of the drums, she stretches out her arms like a fan as if holding the corners of a pollera and goads the drummers faster. She swirls and dips gliding willfully on a current of black sand. When even the air is dancing, a male Congo practitioner enters the space. With his brown face made black with charcoal and his pants turned inside out in the Congo way, he shifts his weight in dialog with the music. The Congo woman up-tilts her chin, confident and defiant; it is a command more than an invitation. With hips and shoulders a flurry of syncopation, the Congo male approaches, front leg
bent, back leg straight; front thigh bouncing to the push of the back leg. The dance between the two is a negotiation of power and will. He wants a kiss. She teases, he pursues, and she thwarts his effort by shielding her face with her (invisible) pollera and/or by twirling away. Another Congo male pushes his way through the crowd and replaces the first as the dance continues, “Micaela, cielo, lindo, yo bailo contigo la plena.”

Seizing his opportunity, an inebriated foreign white male spectator trades places with the male member of the Congo couple and attempts the dance. The woman stops for a second, looks at the chorus, smirks and points displeasingly at her new partner as he continues to dance sluggishly around her. The female chorus laughs and fans her on, encouraging her to dance with him. She acquiesces, but with much less enthusiasm than before and with a noticeable grimace. Just like the women, the Congo men tease her. She repays them with looks of playful scorn, non-verbally urging any of them to replace the visitor or any Congo woman to replace her. The visitor, egged on by his male companions, dances in closer, grabs her waist and pulls her toward him. She pushes him away harshly. Drunk and easily knocked off-balance, he stumbles backward to the amusement of his companions and to the indignation of his partner. The Congo men come closer but do not intervene. The female chorus also does not intervene, but rather continues singing without hesitation, except for a few chosen chides from the elders castigating the visitor and daring the Congo woman to teach him a lesson. After a few shakes of her finger and a twist of the neck, the Congo dancer smirks again, opens her arms wide and dances with even more charisma than she had with her Congo partner. She recaptures control of the space, forcing the man to dance-walk backward in any direction she chooses. She smiles as his face reddens and when she has danced with him directly in front of the Congo drums, she presses her body next to his, quickly squeezes his crotch and dances away to the celebratory roars and laughter of the audience. Only then does a Congo man come to rescue the visitor who seems relieved to have been replaced. Over the course of my eight year engagement with the Congo community of Portobelo, Panama, I have witnessed female Congo practitioners embody “respectable” Congo performance for local spectators through mastery, confidence, and dominance. As I will argue in this essay, “respectable” and “respectability” in reference to local Congo performance fit within the domain of what Caribbean social anthropologists following Peter Wilson (1973, 1969), like Jean Bes-mance, then, derives from successfully actualizing one’s talent, skill, attitude, and flair such that the practitioner earns honor and praise for herself as well as her community.

This essay focuses on the ways a particular Afro-Latin community, who call themselves and their performance tradition “Congo,” negotiate encounters with global tourists. More specifically, I attend to how practitioners perform gender and sexuality differently in the ritual space of the Congo tradition, the palenque or palacio, where tourists represent a convenient out-group compared to how they do so for “packaged” presentations where tourists represent the primary audience. How is the Congo tradition packaged for mid-day presentations to primarily white, overwhelmingly U.S. tourists? How do these packaged representations differ from the tradition as it is performed for the community? How do space, place, spectatorship, and desire determine when “respectable” signifies “performative mastery,” as in the opening anecdote, and when it signifies a performative measure of female “decency”? What might respectability as performative mastery offer black Diaspora performance like the Congo tradition?

As a method of analysis, I use the term “local” to focus on the tradition as it is produced and consumed during carnival season primarily for the community. I have coined “like-local” to signal Congo “presentations” of the tradition for the consumption of global tourists. Whereas “local” performances are more active in cultural preservation and community building, “like-local” performances are more active in the commoditization of the tradition. I argue that distinctions between Congo “local” and “like-local” performance may best be accounted for through a nuanced understanding of “respectability” as an aspect of the dualism and doubling endemic to Panamanian Congo traditions.

In his seminal work on systems of social and moral valuation in the Anglophone Caribbean, Wilson (1973, 1969) theorizes a binary system of respectability/reputation within which women and men (respectively) vie for power and status. Within his bifurcated structure, Wilson formulates respectability as a female domestic domain governed by (outside/foreign) norms of Eurocentric middle-class values and reputation as a male public domain governed by (inside/indigenous) valuations of talent and achievement. Rather than repeat this contested dichotomy, I argue that female Congo practitioners make a performative choice to forefront qualities.
Wilson associates with reputation for local spectators and those he associates with respectability for outside spectators. In order to match the messy dynamism of cultural performance, I want to empty these qualities out onto the table to examine how racialized, gendered, classed cultural agents who code-switch for local and tourist audiences take them up to use as needed. Including qualities often ascribed to “reputation” in an analysis of female respectability recuperates the breadth of the term as it relates to women’s ability to earn respect.

For the purpose of this analysis, I extend “inside/home” to signify local spectators and “outside/foreign” to signal tourist spectators. When expanded thus, many of the qualities associated with the “street” in the scheme Burton (1997:162) extends from Wilson (play, chaos, freedom, mobility, and noise) exist in female Congo performance for the local community while many of those he posits as “home” (order, discipline, decorum, work, and self-restraint) exist in female Congo “like-local” performances for tourist audiences. I argue that female practitioners use respectability as “decency” when performing for outside/foreign audiences and respectability as “performative mastery” when performing for inside/home audiences.

As a critical ethnographer, I began my field research with the Congo community in May 2000 as part of the Spelman College Portobelo, Panama Summer Art Colony. I returned for three weeks in May 2001, 2002, 2004, 2005 and 2006, and for two weeks in June 2007. With the assistance of a Fulbright Grant, I spent ten months in Panama in 2003, returned for one month in February 2004, and for two weeks in February 2007 during carnival season. My ethnographic process incorporates practices conventionally intoned as “participant-observation,” interviews, oral histories, relevant archival research, historiography and newer methods that engage art and performance as experimental ways of gathering ethnographic data. Thus far, I have conducted over thirty in-depth interviews with inter-generational Congo practitioners; witnessed and participated in the Portobelo Congo tradition both within the town and with the group as it traveled to other cities and townships; engaged in archival research in personal archives in Portobelo and in public archives in Panama City (such as the National Library, Panama Canal Authority Library, the National Archives and the libraries of the two main tourism bureaus); and witnessed nationalist celebrations involving different Congo communities throughout the year as the country prepared for its centennial celebration on November 3, 2003. In addition, I staged three performance projects within the community as part of my ethnographic method.5

The Congo tradition embodies one of the two trajectories of black identity in Panama, Afro-Coloniales (colonial blacks) also known as Costeños (coastal blacks). Afro-Antillanos (West Indian blacks) represent the other trajectory. Afrocoloniales are associated with the labor regimes of slavery, have roots anchored five hundred years deep in Panama and entered the twentieth century as Spanish-speaking Panamanians.6 West Indians are associated with the labor regimes of the banana plantations, the Panama railroad and the Panama Canal, have roots reaching just beyond a century and entered the twentieth century as English-speaking first and second-generation immigrants (J. Arroyo 1995:157).7 Their dialectical relationship negotiated the terrain of “blackness” in twentieth century Panamanian ethnoracial discourse.

The Congos of Panama are cultural descendants of the Cimarrones, runaway enslaved Africans who fought for and won their freedom during the Spanish colonial period.8 Cimarrones assisted English privateers like Francis Drake and pirates like Henry Morgan to successfully sabotage Spanish colonial trade practices in Panama and secure their own freedom.9 The Congos of Portobelo, like other Congo communities along the Caribbean coast of Panama, use ritual performance to celebrate and share their history, traditions and cultural practices. Such performances generally occur during carnival season (Congo season), which begins on January 20 and concludes on Ash Wednesday. Carnival in Portobelo, like most carnivals following the Roman Catholic liturgical year, is the last celebration of feast, music, and dancing before Lent, the forty days from Ash Wednesday until Easter. Some form of carnival took root in nearly every country colonized by the Spanish, French, and Portuguese. Unlike the more commercialized carnival celebrations in Las Tablas and Panama City, carnival in Portobelo is relatively small, lacking in significant corporate sponsorship or media coverage, and consisting primarily of home-made costumes and celebrants from the town (Alexander 2006).

Carnival season in Congo communities peaks between dusk on Shrove Tuesday and dusk on Ash Wednesday with the Congo drama, a mythic battle between good and evil that pits Congos/Blacks against devils/brutal enslavers. Like most carnival traditions throughout the Americas, there is a hierarchy of characters. In the Congo tradition, the queen is the pinnacle of power (Alexander 2006; Smith 1976).10 The primary characters include Mer-
ced (the queen), Juan de Dios (the king), Pajarito (the prince whose name means “little bird”), Minina (the princess),11 Diablo Mayor (the major devil), Diablo Segundo (the secondary devil), as many as seventy-two minor devils, a priest, one angel and six souls, a cantelante or revillín (primary singer), a female chorus, three male drummers, and a host of male and female Congo dancers. Through the Congo drama and the language of the Congo dialect, the group parodies the Catholic Church and Spanish crown to create an embodied critique of the institution of slavery and its primary agents. Parody, manifested in reversals of meaning as well as reversals of clothing, is a central element of the drama. Enslavers appropriated Christian ideology regarding the “devil” as a means to dissuade rebellion and protect the institution of slavery, and, by extension, preserve the Spanish imperial project. The Congo drama repositions power by casting Spanish enslavers in the role of devil and by using Christian symbols as well as symbols of the Spanish crown. The Congo drama, also referred to locally as “el juego Congo”/the Congo game, does not end until El Diablo Mayor is de-masked, de-wiped, baptized, and symbolically sold.

Congo performance is a marriage of interdependent dualisms: good and evil, insider and outsider, sacred and secular. These dualisms manifest themselves in Congo consciousness and material practice. Connected to a quality of DuBoisian double-consciousness, Congo collective consciousness (1994) is a dialectical engagement with how they perceive of themselves as Congo versus how national and global outsiders perceive of them; this is what Frantz Fanon (1967:110) refers to as “third person consciousness”. Speaking about the Congo tradition and this sense of double-ness, Elsa, a Congo ritual specialist, recounts the dilemma of Congo practitioners in the early-to-mid twentieth century, “Sentiamos la vergüenza con la puerta abierta y el orgullo con la puerta cerrada” (We felt shame [about our tradition] with the door open and pride with the door closed) (Molinar de la Fuentes 2003). As Afro-coloniales whose history and cultural performance link them to an enslaved past, Congos are an exoticised black presence in the equally exoticised black space of Portobelo. Congo consciousness represents a kind of thinking about oneself and one’s culture from the perspective of insiders keenly aware of the fissure between insider and outsider perceptions of their tradition.

At the same time, Congo consciousness and material practice also reflect “double-consciousness” as a “strategy” to use the outsider’s preconceived notions against her (Morrison 1997:12). Double-consciousness as a strategy aligns with Michel de Certeau’s (1984) concept of subversive consumption and Marta E. Savigliano’s (1995) analysis of the ways subjugated groups use cultural products to “trick back” on those in power.12 Just as Savigliano (1995) argues of Argentinean tango, Elizabeth McAllister (2002) of Haitian Rara, and Carolyn Cooper (2004) of Jamaican dancehall, I assert that Panamanian Congo performance may likewise be used as a “strategic language, a way of talking about, understanding, and exercising decolonization” (Savigliano 1995:16). This conception of double-consciousness as strategy aligns with Debra Thomas’ (2004:232) articulation of cultural duality as “maintaining and enacting one or another repertoire of behavior that is considered appropriate for a situation, given a common comprehension of locally specific relations of both material and symbolic power.”

In Colonial times, the Congo carnival performances were done under the watchful gaze of enslavers who saw the reversals of clothing, heard the Congo dialect13 and participated in the joke not knowing that they were its objects (Esquina 2000). The Congo tradition depends on an in-group that gets the joke and an out-group that is the joke. As Thomas (2004) notes

Descendants of Africans throughout the Atlantic world have been forced to develop a worldview that enables them to negotiate Western tenets of civilization while at the same time creatively critiquing them. This inherently double-sided structural formation has meant that for black people, at least dual visions, lifestyles, and consciousness are not only possible, but necessary. [2004:258]

Moving from colonial to contemporary times, local and global tourists easily form a convenient out-group.14 Many non-Congo Portobeleño spectators and visitors from neighboring towns have witnessed the tradition throughout their lives without understanding the significance of the reversals and without being able to understand the Congo dialect. I argue that this local out-group, as well as national and international visitors who happen to witness carnival in Portobelo, become the object of the joke for local performances.

Congo performances continue to preserve the subversive space of spectatorship, which allows Congos to watch the watcher watch. The space of Congo performance puts both Congos and their audiences “on stage” in full view of one another.
Compared to local performance, like-local presentations feature a larger out-group to make fun of and a smaller in-group privy to the joke. This larger out-group creates a heightened sense of ethnoracial and class-inflected self-consciousness, which shifts female “respectable” Congo performance from the arena of “mastery” to “decency.” By decency, I am evoking what Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (1993) refers to as the “politics of respectability,” which African American women’s movements used as a part of what she calls “uplift politics.” These class-based discourses attempted to combat negative stereotypes of African-descended people by having them out-perform the dominate society’s norms of moral propriety. Although well intentioned, this strategy often re-inscribed the dominate culture’s stereotypes by having African-descended people by having them out-perform the dominate society’s norms of moral propriety. Although well intentioned, this strategy often re-inscribed the dominate culture’s stereotypes on “lower class” cultural practices and agents who failed or refused to conform (Higginbotham 1993:1–4). This understanding of respectability aligns with Besson’s (1993:26) analysis of Afro-Caribbean respectability as “cultural resistance rather than Eurocentric respectability”.

Two weeks after I arrived for my extended field research in 2003, Sarabi, one of my young friends, yelled from the street toward my bedroom window, “¡Los gringos vienen!” By the time I reached my balcony to descend the stairs, I looked out at the largest ship I had ever seen in Portobelo. During the dry season—January through early May—small cruise ships carrying fifty to sixty passengers enter the Portobelo bay twice a week for one-hour tours of the area. Larger vessels—such as Princess Cruise Line, Carnival and Sun Cruises—dock in Colon, the northern port city of the Panama Canal, and host bus tours to Portobelo. According to statistics provided by the Panamanian Tourism Institute (IPAT), approximately one-fourth of visitors to Panama came from the U.S. in 2003, which was more than the combined numbers from the Central American, Caribbean, and European regions. This ratio has been fairly consistent for over a decade (“Tourism Statistics”).

Global trade and tourism are not new to the town. Columbus made it his initial point of disembarkation for his fourth voyage to the “New World”; El Nazareno (“the black Christ”) has attracted pilgrims since the sixteenth century; the Portobelo Fairs made it the nexus of trade in the Spanish colonial world in the seventeenth and well into the eighteenth centuries, the Panama Canal construction project touched the area in the early twentieth century and UNESCO declared the town a World Heritage site in 1980. However, the volume and type of tourism have shifted since the December 31, 1999 turnover of the Panama Canal. When the U.S. military controlled the waterway, it limited the amount of tourist traffic as a matter of security because of the Canal’s strategic importance. In the absence of the currency generated by the U.S. military personnel and the annuity the U.S. government paid to lease the Canal Zone, which was always significantly less than the loan debt the U.S. collected from Panama (Pearcy 1998:75), the Republic has greatly increased its emphasis on tourism to generate additional economic revenue. The cruisers port, Colon 2000, located in Colon City, has been seminal in this growth; almost all Portobelo dry season international cruise and bus tourism pass through it. In addition to the services it provides independent cruise lines, it also partners with local tour groups, like Aventuras 2000, to offer excursions to Portobelo. Like the descriptions provided by international guides, tour groups such as Aventuras 2000 as well as governmental agencies such as the National Institute of Art and Culture (INAC) and the Panamanian Institute of Tourism (IPAT) market Portobelo’s black cultural heritage. Tourists, therefore, come to the town to experience the rain forest, the colonial forts, the “black” Christ and the Congos—all unique markers of black resistance culture in the region. Two popular travel guides, Panama: The Bradt Travel Guide and Lonely Planet Panama, for example, feature highlighted narrative boxes focused on the “black Christ.” Both also include narratives that render the Congos quaint, primitive and foolish. The former refers to the tradition as “an expressive tribal dance ritual” with practitioners “feigning lunacy through movement and screams” (Woods 2005:288). The later is much more egregious. The author, Scott Doggett, writes:

The Congos, a festivity in which black people assume the role of escaped slaves and run around taking “captives,” is held in Portobelo and sometimes elsewhere in the province during Carnival[. . .]. The celebrant are generally dressed in outlandish outfits that include tattered clothes and hats that resemble crowns[. . .]. All are so animated that they look like they’ve just come from an insane asylum[. . .]. Sound bizarre? It is. If you ever find yourself an innocent “victim” of this tradition, try not to freak out and kill someone. They are just harmless Congos. [Doggett 2001:315–319]

Visitors who look to these guides enter Portobelo expecting laughable black antics rather than a sophisticated cultural performance. As in colonial
times, the Congos render a like-local performance that shields as much as it reveals and uses its audiences’ expectations as fodder for their own amusement. As tourists prepare to witness Portobelo and its Congos, the Congos and other Portobeleno spectators gather to be entertained by “los gringos” or “las turistas.”

On the day Sarabi summoned me downstairs to see the first Congo like-local presentation of 2003, carnival season was just a week away and excitement had started building. Once I arrived at the Aduana, the exhibition awaiting me caught me off guard. Taking their seats on stone steps in the shade of an awning was the quintessential spectacle of the North American tourist. Most of the visitors were middle-age or older white men and women fully clad in Bermuda shorts, Hawaiian shirts, oversized sunglasses, baseball caps (men), and hats with big floppy rims (women). Some cupped small digital or disposable cameras in their palms; others wore the shiny silver or black hardware around their necks like medallions. Congo men sometimes parody tourists by carrying plastic toy cameras. The toy camera holder often passes his camera to another Congo and poses with a tourist while his Congo companion pretends to take his picture.

Whereas the Congo drama features the full spectrum of characters, tourist presentations concentrate on an abbreviated form of the tradition, which includes only the drummers, chorus, primary singer, and dancers. The queen, or someone standing in for her, is the only major character active in both local and like-local performances. The drums and call-and-response singing function as the musical backbone of local and like-local performances while the social dance component functions as their core. Outside of its ritual context, Congo social dance may be performed informally in a cantina, backyard, or wherever an improvised drumbeat or bass-line inspires it. According to Melba, a former Congo queen from Portobelo, “A Congo woman lead[s] the dance with her hip movements to invite the Congo men to dance. In the dance, he makes all types of faces and advances toward her trying to kiss her and she, with her skirt, tries to cover herself and is always shaking her skirt. It is a tease. Another female dancer replaces her and the dance continues and so on and so on for both sexes” (Esquina 2000). When this social dance element includes the Congo drummers, chorus, and revellin, it is referred to as a “congada.” Each Friday and Saturday evening from January 20 until Lent, Congo communities throughout Panama hold “local” congadas. Likewise, each Wednesday and Saturday morning throughout the tourist season, the Congos of Portobelo performance like-local congadas for their international audiences.

Compared with the camaraderie, virtuosity, competition, and play that mark “respectable” female Congo “local” performances, female practitioners perform pristine, dispassionate, respectability before their like-local spectators. Whereas, the men’s Congo embodiment for tourists is just as bold and playful as their evening performances, women perform with stoic faces, glances uncharacteristically aimed downward and more subdued hip movements. Often with absent expressions, female Congo like-local performers leave their places in the chorus to dance with a Congo partner. With each change of partner, the female dancers maintain neutral expressions, except for moments when a Congo man or boy might succeed in getting a kiss, which ushers a smirk and gentle shove from his female counterpart. In Congo local performance, the game of flirtation between female and male practitioners frames them metaphorically as matadora and bull, each performatively antagonizing the other with bold gestures. In tourist like-local performances, however, female practitioners enact a more demure performance, resisting, rather than tempting their partners. The movement vocabulary of female Congo local performance includes direct eye contact; slightly rounded, outstretched arms near-level with the chest; and pronounced side-to-side hip swings. Comparatively, Congo like-local presentations feature more distant down-turned eyes, lower more angular arms that lift from the elbows at hip-level and more compact hip swings. I contend that “respectable” like-local female performance relies on strategies of double-consciousness to combat any preconceived notions outside spectators may have brought with them about the dance as “erotic,” “raunchy,” or “obscene,” class and racially laden criticism that caused earlier generations of Congos to keep the tradition hidden and which haunts black vernacular performance traditions throughout the black diaspora.

Although the social dance component of the Congo formal and informal social dance performance may be familial and innocent, as in a grandson dancing with his grandmother or friends dancing with one another, the Congos give themselves room for moderate sexual flirtation and teasing within the performative boundaries of the local tradition. Unlike their more passive, prim performances during their like-local presentations, women more than men lead the game of flirtation in local performances of the tradition, both within the ritual space of the tradition (as illustrated in the
opening anecdote) and in its more spontaneous “local” iterations. In January 2003, for example, the Congos began a spontaneous congada on a chartered bus en route from Portobelo to a presentation in Panama City. Male Congos sat toward the back of the bus, while women sat at the front. Each group gossiped among themselves raising their voices at strategic points, to facilitate eavesdropping. The nature of their flirtation was consistent with some forms of local Congo social dance. One of the younger Congo women, a woman in her early twenties who would wear the Queen’s crown that evening, had brought a long tubular balloon on the bus with her. She laughed and joked as she twisted the balloon into a dildo, which made the women howl with laughter. Pretending to ignore the men, she sang into the balloon dildo and passed it like a microphone between the women until one of the elders playfully snatched it and bopped her on the head with it. All the while, the men were catcalling, “Chupa! Chupa!” (“Suck it! Suck it!”) joking and laughing among themselves. When one of the younger men attempted to traverse the space between the two groups (like a Congo dancer attempting to steal a kiss), several women pushed him back toward the rear of the bus and taunted him (like a Congo female dancer averting her partner’s advances). He smiled coyly, acquiesced, turned as if heading back to his seat and then charged forward for one final attempt. Two Congo women pushed him hard enough to set him off-balance and leave him at the mercy of the other Congo men who caught him, setting the entire bus ablaze with laughter and taunts. The bus, in this context, functions as “a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion” (Gilroy 1993:4), which extends a space to understand “local” Congo performances of gender and sexuality.

With no local hotels and with bus service to the town stopping at 9 p.m., the amount of tourist spectatorship for evening “local” Congo performances is limited. In the ritual space and place of Congo “local” performance, the Congo game has rules for “playing” with outsiders. According to Melba, “When an outsider, a strange man, tries to participate in the dance without permission from the queen, the drummers throw down the drums and refuse to play.” In contemporary Congo performance, Congo men often choreograph this part of the spectacle by gently pulling eager tourists into the center of the palacio to dance. When the tourist reaches the center, his Congo escort motions the drummers to drop their drums. The visitor is then asked to pay a token ransom to the Congo queen, which may be a few coins or liquor. Once the transgressor’s debt has been paid, Congo men walk him over to the drums, manipulate his hands to grab them and place them once again between the drummers’ legs. At this point, the visitor is encouraged to dance with a Congo partner or another female visitor. “The palenque in Colonial times was the cimarrones’ settlement,” Melba explained. “It was the place of freedom where the cimarrones ruled. Whoever enters our palenque now should be able to endure the game (Esquina 2000).

As in Congo local performance, Congo men orchestrate the community’s interaction with tourists by playing with them and by leading them into the dance space. Just as in the evening “local” performances, male tourists sometimes interpret the attempted kiss of the dance as an opportunity to get too close to female Congo partners. However, whereas Congo women help police deviant male tourist interaction within the space of local Congo performance using the movement vocabularies advocated by the tradition, Congo men use the mask of buffoonery to police male transgressors during like-local performances. Connecting diaspora tricksters Eshu Elegba (Yoruba diaspora); Anansi the Spider (Akan of Ghana), Brother Nanci (Anansi’s Caribbean name), and Brer Rabbit (United States), Arturo Lindsay asserts that “the Congo buffoonery we are witnessing today is simply a retention of the ruse enslaved Africans employed in order to be perceived as non-threatening” (2003:138). At the first sign of inappropriate closeness, Congo men swoop in on male tourist transgressors aggressively blow their whistles and dance-walk them back to the periphery of the performance space.

While Congo social dance is generally a dance between one man and one woman, multiple people are invited forward at the end of tourist presentations in the spirit of fun and inclusion. At that moment, Congo women’s faces open up with smiles and laughter as do the other Congo spectators’. Repeatedly, I have noticed that the pleasure of presentations for the Congos comes in large part from watching their spectators attempt the dance. With only physical clues to guide them, some female spectators inevitably end up mimicking the movements of their male partners and vice versa. The Congo chorus smiles and claps encouragingly while giggling and gossiping among themselves. For spectators who try in earnest, Congo men often approach them, shake their heads disapprovingly and mimic the correct movement repeatedly until the visitor catches on. At least one flamboyantly clumsy dancer generally endears himself or herself to the Congo community. Bold and awkward tourists are
just as likely as talented or industrious ones, if not more so, to win approving smiles and nods from the female chorus. Each group performs for the other.

Congo tourist presentations are “like-local” mementoes visitors can pack away alongside handicrafts from indigenous communities and “My Name is Panama” tee shirts. The Congos take “like-local” snapshots too. These mental pictures become the “gringo” anecdotes they swap like trading cards on their short walks home and with their families once they arrive there. With less economic resources and greater bureaucratic hurdles in the travel process, like-local presentations are the Congo communities’ primary means to “tour” gringos through face-to-face encounters. Panamanians interested in traveling to the U.S. must pay a one hundred dollar non-refundable visa application fee and set up a visa appointment. If the applicant arrives late or misses her appointment, she must pay the fee again in order to schedule a new appointment (“Visa Services”). In contrast, travelers with the U.S. passports enter Portobelo to witness the tradition with five-dollar visas, which may be obtained at the airport hours before take-off or upon landing. Traveling to Panama, then, is often cheaper than cross-country travel and only slightly less convenient.

In packaging the tradition for tourist consumption, the Congo community transforms the female-dominated space of Congo performance into a male-dominated and regulated space, thereby masking the gender dynamics of the local performance. Rather than bold matadors that drive the performance, female Congo performance becomes muted and restrained. During the temporal space of carnival season, the palacio functions as the Congo’s “local” domain while the steps of the customs house serve as the tourists’ domain. Whereas respectability as performative mastery guides female Congo performance in the space of the palacio, respectability as female “decency” guides female Congo performance for tourists. This more demure means of performance represents a Congo consciousness aware of the expectations of wild exoticism tourists bring with them mixed with a greater interest in witnessing tourists than performing toward their expectations. Just as the black restaurant patrons in Gwendolyn Brooks’ poem “VII. I love those little booths at Benvenuti’s,” amuse themselves by performing against white patrons’ expectations of them, Congos anticipate tourists’ expectations and turn them inside out. In place of Brooks’ “the colored people will not ‘clown’,” I would pen “the Congo women will not ‘perform exotic’” (Brooks 1944:59–60). However, should the curious tourist linger in Portobelo late into the evening, she will witness a performance of female respectability that teases, controls, commands attention, and dominates.

NOTES
1. “Polleras” are long, full skirts worn by female Congo dance practitioners. Commonly used in cultural performances throughout Latin American and parts of the Caribbean, they are derived from the everyday house dresses worn in Spain and by enslaved women throughout the Americas during the colonial period. Unlike the more ornate and expensive form worn in the “tamborito,” Panama’s national dance, Congo polleras are generally homemade dresses created from eight yards of cotton fabric. The fabric typically includes a small floral design. See Dora P de Zárate (1973) for information regarding the pollera as a national symbol of Panama.

2. Portobelo is a Spanish-speaking, predominantly Roman Catholic rural community located on the Caribbean coast of Panama. The town of Portobelo is the capital of the Portobelo district, which reported a population of 1,874 in the 2000 census. For the purpose of this study, the name “Portobelo” always refers to the town, which reported 286 residents in 2000.

3. As Besson (1993) makes clear, the gendered separation between respectability and reputation is much more complicated than Wilson’s binary allows. Elements of male culture may fit under the rubric of “respectability” just as easily as those of female culture fit under “reputation” (Besson 1993; Burton 1997). Likewise, Karen Fog Olwig (1993) has used cultural hybridity arguments to critique the relationship Wilson establishes linking respectability almost exclusively to foreign values.

4. Blending Dwight Conquergood’s (2002) use of “co-performative witnessing” as a better way to name the dynamic interaction between cultural agents and those who attempt to learn more about their practices by co-participating in them with Johannes Fabians (2002) focus on ethnographic “awareness”, I have adapted “co-performative awareness” as one extension of Conquergood’s original term.

5. For a comprehensive approach to critical ethnography, especially performance-centered methods, see D. Soyini Madison (2005).

6. Enslaved Africans entered Panama in the early 1500s. See Rout (1976), regarding African experiences in Spanish America. See Maria del Carmen Mena García (1984) for a detailed historical account of sixteenth century Panama including the
growth of black populations. See Carol Jopling (1994) for archival information regarding indigenous and African-descended populations in sixteenth and seventeenth century Panama. Although a precise percentage is not provided, Webster (1973) indicates that free and enslaved blacks greatly outnumbered the Spanish in Portobelo by the end of the seventeenth century. For more general historical perspectives of black populations in Panama, see Roberto de la Guardia (1977) and Alfredo Castillero Calvo (1969).

For a brief overview of colonial and West Indian black presences in Panama, see Luis Díez Castillo (1981).

7. For more information on West Indian canal experience see Michael Conniff (1995, 1992), Lance-lot Lewis (1980), Velma Newton (1987), and George Westerman (1980). Although workers from the French West Indies were also active on the Canal, the vast majority were from the British West Indies.


10. According to personal interviews and my own observations over the past eight years, the role of the queen is to provide central leadership to the Congo organization, to gather the group when they agree to perform for a special occasion and to act as their main organizational contact person. In the first performance of the Congo drama, “El Diablo Tun Tun,” the devil attempts to capture the queen, the seat of Congo power, but the Congos help her trick him and subdue him before he is able to do so. The three most important primary characters in the Congo drama are the queen, the major devil, and Pajarito.

11. Over the span of my field experience in Portobelo, this character has not been played.

12. Using the guise of complicity in the black diaspora has often been strongly related to what Toni Morrison (1997) refers to as a “strategy” of DuBois’ double-consciousness; double-consciousness as method rather than as state-of-being. De Certeau discusses the ways consumers/users undermine the power of producers/makers through procedures of consumption that subvert dominant rites, rituals, and representations.

13. The Congo dialect is a form of creolized Spanish that relies on reversals of meaning as a form of linguistic play. For research on the Congo dialect, see Graciela Joly Luz (1981a, b) and John Lipski (1985). Maricel Martín Zuñigan (2002) includes a glossary with the Spanish equivalent of various words and phrases in the Congo dialect of Portobelo.

14. For an analysis of the continuity between colonial and contemporary modes of Caribbean consumption and their relationship to tourism, see Mimi Sheller (2003).

15. See also Patricia Schechter (2001), E. Frances White (2001), and Victoria Wolcott (2001).

16. According to the Panamanian Institute of Tourism, a total of 119,024 tourists visited Panama from the U.S. in 2003 compared to 49,045 from Central America, 30,425 from the Caribbean, and 38,845 from Europe; a combined total of 118,315. With the exception of Colombia, which provided 90,159 visitors in 2003, U.S. citizens traveled to Panama five times more than those of any other country.

17. See Arturo Lindsay (1999), Eric Jackson (2003) and Jose Jimenez for more information of El Nazareno (the black Christ). See George Dilg (1975) and Enriqueta Vilar (1986) regarding the Portobelo Fairs. See Peter Earle (2007) for an updated historical analysis of colonial Panama. See Christopher Ward (1989) for review of historical literature covering pre-conquest to nineteenth century Panama. See David McCullough (1977) and Dulio Arroyo (1946) regarding the worksite established at the San Felipe fort area of Portobelo to transplant gravel from the area to the Atlantic mouth of the Canal. See Leslie Larson (2002) regarding the San Lorenzo Protected Area of which Portobelo is a part.

18. Colonial customs house.

19. Melba Esquina (2000) presented her written text in Spanish during a May 27, 2000 interview conducted by two undergraduate participants of the 2000 Spelman Art Colony, Oronike Odelye, Yolanda Covington, and myself. Dr. Arturo Lindsay, director of the Spelman Art Colony, mediated the interview and helped frame our questions within a Congo cultural context when necessary. Oronike and Yolanda translated the original text into English. Dr. Rafael Ocasia, Associate Professor of Spanish at Agnes Scott College, was present during the interview and double-checked the final translation.
20. There is a body of scholarship on this subject related to Jamaican dancehall. See, for example, Carolyn Cooper (1995, 2004) and Norman Stolzoff (2000).

21. “My Name is Panama” is a clothing brand in Panama. “Molas” are intricate embroidery work created by the Kuna Indians, which is sold throughout Panama including tables outside of the Aduana in Portobelo.

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