

“Juke Joints, Rum Shops, and Honky-Tonks: Black Migrant Labor and Leisure in Caribbean Guatemala and Honduras, 1898–1922”

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In 1922, Eugene Cunningham and his companion, both white travelers from the United States, entered a combination bar and grocery store in Zacapa on the Caribbean coast of Guatemala. The store was operated by a white American expatriate. An African American customer, also an expatriate, invited the travelers to have a drink with him. When they ignored this request, the man ordered the two white men to join him, after which a violent altercation ensued. In the course of his travels, Cunningham also heard of a white bar operator who warned a racist Irish American expatriate that if he continued to call blacks “nigger,” “his end would come suddenly from a knife between the ribs.”¹

What do anecdotes like these—anecdotes in which white men of European ancestry are threatened by black Americans in Guatemala—tell us about the relationship between alcohol and culture, class, and race on the Caribbean Coast of Guatemala in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries? Black immigrants went to Guatemala in the hope of finding better economic opportunities than were available to them in their home

region. The labor market in lowland Guatemala was good because Guatemalan nationals refused jobs in malaria-infested regions where railroad track was laid. Black immigrants were willing to go there and work long hours for higher wages. Eventually, some workers seized opportunities to become small-scale entrepreneurs. Because of the labor scarcity in the railroad industry and their status as U. S. citizens abroad, they were able to exercise some latitude in confronting would-be exploiters in Guatemala.

At the turn of the century, black laborers in Guatemala had a greater degree of freedom and rights as U. S. citizens than blacks in the Jim Crow U.S. South because the U.S. State Department was determined to protect U.S. nationals and capital in Central America. When they could, workers sought the aid of U.S. diplomats in struggles with contractors and racist and repressive Guatemalan officials. But dealing with racist U.S. diplomats was difficult and the majority of workers maintained a shaky existence, hoping one day to return home, to purchase a profitable piece of property, or to start a successful business. The most successful immigrants married Guatemalan women and acculturated into Guatemalan society. Their stories, so often ignored by scholars, suggest both the opportunities that the oppressed black laborers of the U.S. South found outside the

country and the degree to which their struggle for just treatment had a foreign and diplomatic dimension.²

By 1922, large numbers of black immigrants from the United States and the West Indies had settled in places like Zacapa and Izabal, which also hosted a population of native Garifuna, known at the time as "black Caribs" in Livingston (see figure 4.2 Map). The settlement's leisure culture included integrated bars with live music and gambling houses. According to the Nicaraguan revolutionary Augusto César Sandino, who worked on banana plantations in Honduras, the same could be said for that country's Caribbean coast. On paydays, it was common to see laborers in banana and railroad towns on the coasts of both countries drunk on *aguardiente*, their pockets filled with U.S. greenbacks. Considering such evidence through the lens of cultural history, I argue that enjoying liquor, food, gambling, sexual contact, and jazz music in juke joints and rum shops represented a continuation of the salient cultural traditions of the black immigrants who came from the U. S. South and the Caribbean and resided on the Caribbean Coast of Guatemala and Honduras.

{fig. 4.1 Black stevedores loading bananas on a railroad car in Costa Rica, circa 1920}*all images will be shown in power point form as part of the paper introduction at the colloquium.

{fig. 4.2 Black stevedores unloading Bananas from a railroad car in Mobile, Alabama 1937}

This chapter focuses on the Guatemalan departments of Izabal and Zacapa, where two Caribbean Coast African diaspora communities developed, as well as on the bordering coastal region of Honduras, which had a similar demographic makeup.³ In contrast to the other contributions in this volume, this chapter focuses on foreigners not nationals, the lowland instead of the highland region, and black subjects instead of indigenous people. Like Alvis Dunn's contribution, this essay focuses on the places where alcohol was consumed. Whereas Dunn looks at mid-eighteenth century taverns and *vinaterías*, I examine three foreign institutions introduced to Guatemala during the national period: juke joints (sometimes spelled jukejoint); honky-tonk; and rum shops. For largely working class immigrant groups, these institutions served as ethnic clubs, social outlets, and getaways and havens from employers and state officials. These places functioned as what I call entertainment maroons that provided escape from the harsh realities of work in the railroad and later banana industries on the Caribbean Coast.

Enslaved Africans from the Wolof (Senegal and Gambia) and Bambara (Mali) empires introduced the term juke (sometimes

spelled jook) meaning wicked or disorderly to the colonial south: In Wolof the word is *dzug* and Bambara it is *dzugu*. Over time, African Americans used the term to describe wicked places or moves. As southern blacks linked juke with shacks, houses, barns, makeshift night clubs, and dancing, it became closely associated with more formal structures serving liquor, food, and producing live or recorded dance music. Recorded music they said came from a juke or jook box.⁴ Southern African Americans also coined the term honky-tonk, which literally meant a segregated white shack (or juke joint) where rural whites drank similar liquor but listened to country music instead of African American jazz.⁵

{fig. 4.3 Juke joint in Melrose, Natchitoches Parish, Louisiana 1940}

In contrast to juke joints and honky-tonks, rum shops had Caribbean rather than U. S. southern antecedents. There are other differences as well between these three alcohol driven institutions. Based on anthropological field work on the Colombian island of Providencia, in the Caribbean Sea, anthropologist Peter J. Wilson describes rum shops as "no more than a room in a private house, or perhaps a special addition to the house. In a few instances it is a separate small hut."⁶ He goes on to say, they are "crudely furnished with a few rough-hewn wooden tables and chairs or benches, a dirt floor if it is

a separate hut.”⁷ As simple structures, rum shops required less startup capital to build or rent than juke joints or honky-tonks. A second difference is the rum shops’ function and the gender of its customers. Historically rum shops, like Guatemala’s taverns and *vinaterías*, and Argentina’s *pulperías*, served as places for male socializing and refuge from women.⁸ Wilson insists rum shops were spaces where “men gather and women enter only in cases of emergency and at the risk of embarrassment to themselves.”⁹ Similarly Historian Frederick H. Smith maintains that rum shops served as male sanctuaries where men resolved the problems they encountered at home with women and on the job. They also functioned as social welfare centers where unemployed men went to obtain loans and free food.¹⁰

What is most useful is understanding how spaces like juke joints, honky-tonks, and rum shops have historically constructed themselves to cater to specific occupations, classes, ethnicities, and nationalities.¹¹ On the Caribbean coast foreign nationals developed a common working class identity rooted in a shared language, migrant experience, occupations, company housing, and conflicts with Guatemalan officials prejudiced against immigrants, especially blacks, and set on exploiting them. Like the multiethnic maroon communities of the colonial period, juke joints and rum shops in Caribbean Guatemala and Honduras served as multiethnic, egalitarian, working class

spaces of refuge for black immigrants and the few working class white immigrants and Guatemalan nationals who lived among them as the opening bar scene in this chapter suggests.¹² As this historian, and most recently, historians Lara Putnam and Ronald Harpelle have documented, race and class Jim Crow hierarchies existed on the Caribbean coast of Central America. Putnam and Harpelle aptly call them "White Zones."¹³ White zones included the U. S. controlled Panama canal zone and the United Fruit Company (UFCO) and International Railroad of Central America (IRCA) compounds. However the black majority immigrant population in the same region created maroon like societies in which blacks showed little to no deference to whites or Guatemalan nationals, particularly those of a similar or lesser socioeconomic status. They drank, ate, gambled, and caroused with them as equals in junk-joints, rum shops, and honky-tonks. As the black working class immigrants and their culture dominated the Caribbean Coast, they radically changed the racial politics of white owned honky-tonks. In Caribbean Guatemala, honky-tonks outside of white zones became black spaces or at the least—Jim Crow free spaces.

In addition to being about the spaces where Caribbean residents consumed alcohol, like David Carey Jr.'s essay, this chapter is about the lucrative entrepreneurial aspects of alcohol. I argue that for black laborers in first the railroad

and later the banana industry, engaging in the alcohol trade served as one of the quickest routes to capital accumulation and thus to upward mobility. An itinerant laborer's decision to start up a juke joint also signaled his decision to settle on the Caribbean Coast and, more than likely, marry a local woman. In the same way René Reeves' and Carey's essays highlight the role of women in the alcohol economy, this chapter shows that that the majority of black proprietors of bars in Caribbean Guatemala had Guatemalan girlfriends and wives as business partners.

This chapter is also about the role of alcohol (and gambling) as a temporary means of escape from the challenges of daily life on the Caribbean Coast. As mentioned, this part of the immigrant experience in Caribbean Guatemala had antecedents in the U. S. South and the Caribbean. As Smith found in his social and economic history of rum, "alcohol use was widespread in the Caribbean and the enormous amounts of alcohol available contributed to a climate of excessive drinking."¹⁴ Similar findings exist to describe the consumption of moonshine in the rural U. S. south.¹⁵ I argue that hard drinking and gambling had been an integral part of the cultural identity of the Caribbean Coast workforce before they arrived in Guatemala. Although the Caribbean coast became the site of a largely male African diaspora, cultural identities cut across race, class, and gender

with migrant workers from North America, Latin America, and the West Indies participating in similar activities in similar leisure spaces.

A sampling of U.S. and Guatemalan government correspondence and travel accounts support my conclusions. Although out-migration to Guatemala is often interpreted from the perspective of middle- and upper-class whites, this chapter draws on these sources to illuminate the leisure culture of migrant laborers on the Caribbean Coast of Guatemala and Honduras, considering what we might call the alcoholic drinkways of Caribbean Coast workers.

Lowdown Culture in Guatemala and Beyond

Agents representing the railroad and banana industries promised workers lucrative wages and better opportunities if they migrated to Guatemala. Persuaded by the sales pitches of recruiters, workers traveled to the Caribbean Coast of Guatemala from important port cities, such as New Orleans, Mobile, and Kingston.¹⁶ Between 1899 and 1900, one railroad contractor brought in from seventy to eighty workers on a weekly boat from New Orleans. Although it is unclear how many returned to New Orleans, the evidence suggest that at least seventy-eight hundred consigned laborers arrived at railroad camps throughout

Guatemala, other parts of Central America, and Mexico. One work camp in Guatemala had a hundred or more men, some with their wives; an observer described the camp as a small village.¹⁷ In 1902, Frank Dennis wrote, "the most irksome part of my duties as Consular Agent is defending and protecting the Afro American; numbers of whom were brought from the U. S. to work on the Rail Road and are now stranded here."¹⁸

In the Guatemalan context, most of the migrants worked for U.S. railroad contractor Minor Keith's UFCO or his IRCA. Established in 1899 by Keith, UFCO began its banana plantation operations in Guatemala in 1901. By 1904, Keith had gained control of various railroad lines in Guatemala, and he operated UFCO and the railroads virtually as a single entity. That same year, he consolidated many of the railroads around Guatemala to form the IRCA.¹⁹ In 1909, consular agent Edward Reed informed representatives of the Galveston, Texas chamber of commerce that UFCO had some "1200 laborers at work on her banana fields in this Republic."²⁰ Within a year, Reed said, UFCO would need to import additional workers "to handle the output of bananas from her plantations in Guatemala alone."²¹ He stated that Puerto Barrios had "a population of about, 500, who save for a few Guatemalan officials and foreigners, are mostly colored laborers who are employed by the Guatemala R. R. in handling the freight of the in-coming and outgoing steamers."²² Greater openings and

opportunities for advancement in Guatemala came to those workers with an education, knowledge of Spanish and English, and a well-connected benefactor. Foreign workers had to cope with the problem of communicating with non-English speakers, who comprised the majority of local officials in Guatemala. In a report to the Guatemalan Minister of Development, a Northern Railroad official claimed that as late as 1895, one could "calculate that 75% of the [North American] employees cannot speak Spanish."²³ By 1912, UFCO labor agents had imported "large numbers of new laborers for the greatly increased banana plantations near Quirigua and Virginia."²⁴ Many black laborers also lived and worked for the railroad and banana industries in Cayuga, Dartmouth, Puerto Barrios, Livingston, and Zacapa. The new immigrants transformed the bordering departments of Izabal and Zacapa into a provincial African diaspora occupied by blacks of various nationalities.

When UFCO established plantations in Guatemala, it enforced a strict Jim Crow social hierarchy in which the company refused to treat blacks as equal to whites.²⁵ But *aguardiente* became part of an integrated, itinerant, wild working-class milieu in which elements of the culture of the U.S. South and the English speaking Caribbean mixed with those of Latin America on the Caribbean Coast of Guatemala. Historian Pete Daniel describes this kind of pleasure-seeking culture practiced by relatively

autonomous single men and women—roustabouts, as it were—as “lowdown culture.”²⁶ These men and women entered and left the Caribbean coast in search of high wages and plenty of time for lowdown culture, which became synonymous with drinking, gambling, and sexual activity.

The working-class culture on the Caribbean Coast is reminiscent of other black and migrant labor cultures of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. A case in point is Langston Hughes' description of junk joints in his novel *Not Without Laughter* set in the small town of Stanton Kansas between 1912–1918. Speaking about the black section of town he writes: “At night in the Bottoms victrolas moaned and banjos cried ecstatically in the darkness . . . and dice rattled with the staccato gaiety of jazz music on long tables in rear rooms. Pimps played pool; bootleggers lounged in big red cars . . . young blacks fought like cocks and enjoyed it.”²⁷ He goes on to say, “White boys walked through the streets winking at colored girls; men came in autos; old women ate pigs' feet and watermelon and drank beer; whisky flowed; gin was like water; soft indolent laughter didn't care about anything; and deep nigger-throated voices that had long ago stopped rebelling against the ways of this world rose in song.”²⁸ Similar is ethnographer Zora Neale Hurston's description of lowdown culture among black southern, West Indian, and Native American field

hands in the Florida Everglades. As on the Caribbean Coast of Guatemala and Honduras, on paydays workers in the Everglades drank, gambled, and listened to music in black districts.

"Saturday afternoon when the work tickets were turned into cash," wrote Hurston, "everybody buy coon-dick and get drunk."²⁹

She added:

By dusk dark Belle Glade was full of loud-talking, staggering men. Plenty of women had gotten their knots charged too. The police chief in his speedy Ford was rushing from jook to jook and eating house trying to keep order, but making few arrests. Not enough jail space for all the drunks so why bother with a few? All he could do to keep down fights and get the white men out of colored town by nine o'clock.³⁰

Black entrepreneurs accustomed to white customers owned these jooks and eating houses in the segregated South.

Interpreting the dual role of these spaces in the rural south, anthropologist Anne Yentsch insists that in the Mississippi Delta Juke joints also served as places where laborers ate their daily meals. "The grilled chicken, spare ribs, spicy pork, and whole range of smoky barbecued meat cooked so well in these places . . . are a continuum of the cooking

that males did, beginning with those on plantations."³¹ She adds, "In an odd reversal of southern apartheid, throughout the first half of the twentieth century white men sneaked in [juke joints] quietly and cautiously to pick up food and liquor in plain paper bags."³²

The Caribbean Coast, similarly, had "color towns," described as "jazz-crashing" black districts where blacks and whites went to drink, eat, dance, and gamble.³³ One found both black and white entrepreneurs operating bars, restaurants, and gambling houses in these black working-class districts. Yentsch found that people who migrated out of the south "wanted familiar homegrown" institutions and cuisine once they arrived in their new destinations. Entrepreneurs capitalized on this by opening informal businesses catering to the alcohol and food demands needs of newcomers.³⁴ Similarly in Caribbean Guatemala, some black entrepreneurs began as illegal moonshine operators and then mushroomed into formal legitimate juke joints with music and food. Others started with the purchase of a liquor license and blossomed from there. Either way, these legal and illegal businesses could most often be found in close proximity to railroad labor camps, train stations, banana plantations, and immigrant neighborhoods, where they formed an important part of workers' culture of leisure.³⁵ Steamboat and railroad camp cooks brought these foods with them wherever they traveled. "Juke

joints had urban alter egos," argues Yentsch, "and whether sited on an alley or by a cotton field their down-home food was but one focus. Music [and alcohol were] another. The cooks had southern roots, and the food was simple yet complexly layered."³⁶

Contraband and Legal Liquor Sales

Sources dating to 1897 indicate that "individuals of bad law," as one railroad contractor described them, participated in the trade in contraband liquor. Contraband *aguardiente*—untaxed liquor sold by unlicensed individuals—represented a profitable commodity, with many eager customers among UFCO laborers.³⁷

Bootleggers selling contraband *aguardiente* converged on railroad work camps and in the UFCO-controlled Quirigua region on the Caribbean Coast. As Stacey Schwartzkopf and Carey demonstrate in this volume, illegal sellers and workers alike supported the sale of contraband alcohol because the sale of tax-free liquor provided prosperity to entrepreneurs while giving consumers a cheap source of alcohol.³⁸

Railroad, UFCO, and Guatemalan officials, on the other hand, vehemently opposed the illegal sale of liquor. Contraband *aguardiente* commerce effectively robbed the Guatemalan treasury of revenue gained from the sale of spirits to retailers and

ordinary consumers alike. The turn-of-the-century Guatemalan state, under the Liberal dictatorship of Manuel Estrada Cabrera (1898-1920), spent the lion's share of state revenues on constructing the Northern Railroad and a deep-sea Caribbean port at Puerto Barrios in the department of Izabal. Estrada Cabrera also spent a large percentage of state revenues on a repressive military apparatus that included his appointed departmental *jefes politicos*, commandants with garrisons full of soldiers, and local police who carried out his orders. As Carey shows, alcohol taxes represented the regime's greatest source of revenue to pay for these initiatives in modernization and political repression.³⁹

The Guatemalan state both taxed the sale of alcohol and issued gambling licenses. In Zacapa, for example, officials charged \$82.50 per month for the right to sell alcohol until 9:00 p.m. and an additional \$10.00 per month to sell liquor until 11:00 p.m. A gambling license cost \$700 a month; the hours that having a license enabled an establishment to be open are not clear from the available records. *Jefes políticos* strictly enforced the proper use of the licenses. In 1897, Judge Mario E. Orellana of Zacapa "ordered the detention of various individuals found playing Rolet in a liquor establishment" at one o'clock in the morning. The *jefe politico* of Zacapa violently and permanently shut down Simon Shine's barroom/gambling house after

finding it open after 9:00 p.m. because he suspected Shine did not have authorization to keep the bar open until 11:00.⁴⁰

Similarly, in 1913, the *jefe político* in Izabal arrested African American Wilfred Brown, the co-owner of a Puerto Barrios cantina, for "selling liquor after 9:00 p.m. without a license."⁴¹ According to Simon Shine, the possession of a liquor license guaranteed one a "profitable business," but this was predicated upon state officials policing unlicensed liquor sales in bars and cantinas. As Reeves has presented in an earlier chapter, the state had to prevent the illegal sale of liquor if they hoped to encourage the purchase of liquor licenses and thus the sale of legal alcohol in bars and liquor stores that would ensure the continued flow of revenue to government coffers. So, for instance, in Puerto Barrios, police arrested several men for selling *aguardiente* illegally. In a letter to W. F. Sands of the American Legation in Guatemala, UFCO manager Victor Cutter delighted that local authorities in Izabal had "vigorously. . . suppress[ed] . . . illegal liquor sales and as a result" helped put down a banana plantation strike in 1910. Both UFCO and IRCO officials insisted that heavy drinking emboldened some usually more docile laborers to become militant strike organizers.⁴²

The railroad and banana industries had their own reasons for opposing the sale of illegal liquor. Since the 1880s, railroad construction companies had operated company

commissaries in railroad camps and railroad towns.⁴³ In 1901, UFCO built a huge commissary in Puerto Barrios, the largest in the republic. The gigantic commissary had smaller branches on UFCO plantation towns throughout the Quirigua region, all of which sold alcohol at monopoly prices.⁴⁴ Though the precise markup at which the commissaries sold alcohol is unknown, we do know that the UFCO commissary in Puerto Barrios sold tobacco for twenty cents that would have cost five cents in the United States.⁴⁵ Railroad and UFCO officials, like planters and merchants throughout other parts of the Americas, operated debt peonage systems, giving advances on commissary goods like alcohol as a way to encourage their employees to contract debt and thereby to control them.⁴⁶ As on the Caribbean Coast of Costa Rica, in Guatemala, high commissary prices for spirits legally purchased with company scrip (a payday proof of company wages), *quetzals* (Guatemalan currency), US dollars, or credit made the purchase of cheaper contraband *aguardiente* very attractive to workers.⁴⁷

One railroad construction manager complained that the sale of contraband liquor resulted in workers getting drunk, not fulfilling their labor contracts, and thus delaying the completion of railroad construction.⁴⁸ Company officials in both the railroad and the banana industries wanted control over their workers' access to alcohol because they wished to ensure the

availability of a sober, docile, and productive workforce. So they controlled when company commissaries sold alcohol and pressured local officials to stamp out the sale of contraband *aguardiente* in and around company property. This was a legitimate concern: there is evidence to indicate that violence regularly accompanied the abuse of alcohol in UFCO's Quirigua region, for example. "Every Sunday, every fiesta, every pay-day is marked by the machete in red," wrote traveler Morley Roberts.⁴⁹

Two cases, one in Guatemala and the other in Honduras, lend support to the theory that UFCO and IRCA officials attempted to repress alcohol abuse to ensure worker dependability on the job. On about October 3, 1901, Richard Barthel, manager of the Central American Improvement Company, wrote a letter to F. C. García, the Guatemalan minister of development, complaining about the negative effects that drinking had on his railroad workforce. Liquor stores located in close proximity to various work camps threatened "the conservation of good order in the camps and the progress of the work," said Barthel.⁵⁰ The problem of worker abuse of alcohol escalated to the point that company officials fired six skilled workers with North American surnames—a mechanic/machinist, master mechanic/machinist, agent/conductor, and two conductors—for coming to work drunk and therefore not properly performing their duties. As a result of

the dismissals, the fired workers organized a strike on about October 26, 1901. "Everything revolves itself around the fact that certain employees under the influence of alcohol . . . have been discharged, and these, not only did not want to work, but they are instigating the others to declare a strike, to disobey the orders of the superiors, to refuse to work, [and] to leave their jobs," Barthel told García.⁵¹ "These men excited by the effect of the liquor . . . declared that the rest of the employees will help them in their goal of avoiding the movement of the trains," he warned.⁵²

Similarly, we know that abuse of alcohol caused at least one train wreck, thanks to a detailed account of a 1904 train crash in Honduras involving several North American engineers who reported to work intoxicated. In the fall of 1904, officials in San Pedro, Honduras, arrested, tried, and convicted African American brakeman Abe Jones on charges of causing a train wreck due to intoxication. Eyewitnesses claimed that Jones gave the wrong start signal, which led to the train crash. An American consulate investigation into the case provides interesting details about the drinking habits of some train engineers. According to Albert W. Brickwood Jr., who wrote the report, "The crew of both trains [involved in the wreck] had been drinking, and . . . the engineer, Hicks Robinson, was undoubtedly drunk."⁵³ The report continued: "Jones' general reputation with reference

to the use of liquor is not bad; in fact, it does not appear that he drank to excess at any time. . . . In placing the blame for the collision upon Jones, the general belief is that the other members of the train crews were simply seeking to exonerate themselves, and that their testimony given against Jones was collusive, and there appears to be justification for this view."⁵⁴ As in the U.S. railroad industry, the white North Americans who ran IRCA favored white U.S. employees in hiring and promotion to higher-paying positions like locomotive engineer and conductor, relegating jobs like brakeman and fireman to black workers. Thus, it is certainly plausible that Jones faced a racist conspiracy to frame him as just another drunken Negro. The plot against Jones almost worked because of the common stereotype that U.S. and Central American elites held that black immigrants were "frequently drunk and disorderly," while white workers were sober and respectable.⁵⁵

While employers used company security forces and pressured state officials to curb the drinking habits of rank-and-file workers, this goal contradicted that of the Guatemalan state, which granted liquor licenses to anyone who could pay the fee, encouraging liquor sales as a source of state revenue. Sources show that entrepreneurs of all stripes went into business selling legally purchased and taxed alcohol. The first bars can best be described as makeshift rum shops or crude juke joints

constructed in the vicinity of work camps during the construction phase of the Central American railroad system. After construction crews completed IRCA in 1901, very often IRCA workers branched off to open more formal juke joints and honky-tonks at important hubs on the railroad, such as the provincial capitals of the departments of Zacapa and Izabal.⁵⁶ "Jukes are never built from scratch . . . Instead, proprietors and patrons reappropriate almost any available building and transform the space to a jukejoint with complex yet subtle gestures," argues Historian Jennifer Nardone in her research on juke joints in the Mississippi Delta.⁵⁷

She found that juke joints in the Delta never generated a significant amount of income for the proprietors she studied. Most operated their juke joints part time—Thursday through Sunday evenings—while they had a full time job. In the Delta juke joints served as "gathering spaces for particular communities," and spaces for "listening to blues and having a certain amount of freedom to drink, dance, smoke, and celebrate without real threat of being stifled or stopped."⁵⁸ Juke joints played a similar social role in Guatemala but it differed economically in part because of the strict enforcement of the state liquor monopoly. In addition black immigrants found greater economic opportunity in Caribbean Guatemala than in their home regions. As we shall see in the next section,

Guatemalan juke joints with state liquor licenses and multiple businesses made lucrative profits. Most proprietors operated them full time after years of saving enough capital to do so as employees working in the railroad or banana industries.

Bar Ownership in Zacapa and Puerto Barrios

For the shrewd, aggressive, and hard-working black immigrant with a Spanish-speaking wife, Guatemala had its benefits. Despite its corruption and dictators, it was a much easier place for a black immigrant to become a business owner than the Jim Crow South or the British colonial West Indies. Juke joints housed in elaborate structures represented both a source and an indicator of social mobility for immigrants. Most are best described as combination bar, restaurant, gambling house, bank, and barbershop. In other words, bar owners focused on generating multiple sales on payday, when workers with pockets bulging with money wanted to indulge in maximum amounts of pleasure—which meant some form of drinking, gambling, music, and eating.

According to one source, in Zacapa, there were various juke joints a "stone's throw" from the railroad station in a bustling black neighborhood.⁵⁹ Traveler Arthur Ruhl referred to the Guatemalan Caribbean Coast city of Zacapa as a "dreary outpost of Industrialism" inhabited by West Indian, Guatemalan,

Honduran, and North American railroad workers.⁶⁰ Political instability in Guatemala in 1897 exacerbated the country's economic woes, creating large numbers of unpaid and unemployed workers. This situation resulted in social unrest in Zacapa, where unemployed black workers turned to crime to acquire basic necessities.⁶¹ That year, Zacapa's *jefe político*, Elias Estrada, described members of Zacapa's black immigrant community as violent and lawless. A municipal judge in Zacapa told the minister of government and justice that before him came black men whom Zacapa police arrested for robbery, homicide, and attempted rape.⁶²

Under Estrada Cabrera, the departments of Izabal and Zacapa each had strategically placed fortified garrisons manned by poorly paid soldiers and military officers. The soldiers had the responsibility of enforcing liquor laws and arresting those charged with drunken and disorderly conduct.⁶³ Most often, the line between civic and military officials was blurred, and *jefes políticos* and their subordinates customarily used a multitude of methods to illegally supplement their meager government salaries. Authorities did their best to financially exploit subaltern groups, arresting drunken workers often for the explicit purpose of robbing them of their money while in custody, for example.⁶⁴ In September 1898, U. S. consular agent Dennis reported a number of "robberies and abuses . . . mostly

if not entirely confined to the Zacapa section," where "there are about 350 to 400 American citizens, more or less in destitute conditions."⁶⁵

But not all immigrants ended up in dire economic situations. In fact, the available evidence suggests that some immigrants transitioned out of jobs on the railroad once they had saved enough money to move on. In fact, some would be described as "well dressed and very pompous" blacks.⁶⁶ A November 1897 source tells us that John H. Ulyses operated a bar and gambling house at El Rancho located in the highland department of Alta Verapaz and on the same rail line as the department of Zacapa. The crowd that frequented the honky-tonk seemed to be made up of black immigrant workers who freely traveled between both departments as employees of the railroad. They proved so disreputable that the owner of the property took "legal measures to eject" his tenant Ulyses. A fight ensued between the two over the matter, resulting in Ulyses shooting his landlord twice.⁶⁷ The need for a strong police presence remained serious in Zacapa, a city where, according to one worker, "numerous killing affairs [were] common."⁶⁸ Zacapa police arrested Ulyses, and the municipal judge in the city sentenced him to jail time for the crime.

We know more about other proprietors in Zacapa, such as the aforementioned African American Simon Shine.⁶⁹ Born in 1880 in

Montgomery, Alabama, Shine set out alone for Guatemala at the age of fourteen. He came to Guatemala under contract with the Northern Railroad. During his thirteen-year stint with the Northern Railroad, he lived in Zacapa. He worked his way up on the railroad from water boy to brakeman to fireman and eventually to section foreman. In 1907, he still lived in Zacapa, and by the age of twenty-seven he had managed to save approximately fourteen thousand dollars. Shine and his Guatemalan wife earned enough money to pay all the required monthly municipal fees to operate several small but profitable businesses, including a boardinghouse, barbershop, and juke joint with games of chance, all in the same building. The business did well enough to pay the additional state fees for the right to close at 11:00 p.m. instead of Zacapa's designated 9:00 p.m. closing time.⁷⁰ Only a month after it opened, however, Zacapa *jefe político* General Enrique Aris decided to shut Shine down despite the fact he ran a legal liquor business. Aris probably did so because he did not like the fact that Shine was American, black, and quickly becoming wealthy. Aris also had a reputation in Zacapa and elsewhere for being a violent despot who regularly assaulted those he disliked.⁷¹

{fig. 4.4 Bodega that sold food and alcohol in Panama similar ones are described in records on Guatemala.}

Economic opportunities on the Caribbean Coast attracted immigrants from around the world. A Serbian named Tomas Arankosky operated an all-night "canteen" in the same neighborhood as Shine. In 1907 and 1908, respectively, Shine and Arankosky managed establishments that catered to the neighborhood's working-class black immigrants.⁷² Another source describes a white American named Charley Swanson who "ran a combination bar and grocery store in Zacapa." At one time, Swanson worked as a cook on a schooner on the Gulf of Mexico.⁷³

In addition to the department of Zacapa, immigrants also settled in the port community in and around Puerto Barrios. Starting in the 1890s, the population of Puerto Barrios boomed as a result of renewed efforts by Estrada Cabrera's predecessor José María Reyna Barrios (1892-1897) to complete the Northern Railroad.⁷⁴ The railroad facilitated the construction of hotels, restaurants, jails, juke joints, and honky-tonks. The construction boom provided additional job opportunities for unskilled laborers. In addition to construction, immigrant workers controlled many of the waterfront jobs at the turn of the century.⁷⁵ Highly skilled artisans, such as cooks, blacksmiths, boilermakers, carpenters, plumbers, electricians, and mechanics, also found work in Puerto Barrios as result of labor agents who took out attractive advertisements in U.S. and West Indian newspapers. Several black U.S. nationals in Puerto

Barrios became juke joint owners. Both unskilled and skilled workers found plenty of *aguardiente* and jazz music at local clubs. The documented evidence shows that juke joints on the Caribbean coast served a mixed clientele both in term of class and color.⁷⁶

Employment opportunities in Puerto Barrios attracted workers from around the world who spoke many different languages. When traveler Nevin O. Winter visited the Caribbean Coast port, he heard "Spanish, German, French, English, Chinese, and the unintelligible gibberish of the Carib [the Garifuna]" spoken by members of the port's small population.⁷⁷ "Drunkenness is quite common" in the area, Winter noted. He regularly observed people "in a drunken stupor" and unable to walk.⁷⁸ Miguel Angel Asturias, a Guatemalan Nobel laureate in literature, described Puerto Barrios as being like the Florida Everglades, a place with the "mystery of languages" and the "confusion of the Tower of Babel."⁷⁹ By the early 1900s, African Americans who had first come to the port in the 1880s as railroad workers had, like Simon Shine, saved up their money and started small businesses, including bars and restaurants.

Like Shine, black immigrant Sam Lee operated a juke joint in Puerto Barrios with his Guatemalan wife. Lee was born in 1878 in Mississippi. In 1895, at the age of seventeen, he departed for Guatemala. Those who knew him in Guatemala described him as

"quite a shrewd fellow," and he was well-known throughout the "towns, farms, and camps along the railway" in the department of Izabal.⁸⁰ After marrying Guatemalan national Josefa Guzmán, Lee became a successful juke joint operator that sold food in Puerto Barrios, as well as a merchant. As members of a marginalized group, English speaking immigrants like Lee obtained socioeconomic advantages and thus social mobility by courting and marrying nationals. Such advantages included kinship relations, access to local populations, and assistance in learning the native language and customs; this more than likely provided them with competitive advantages over other immigrants who lacked these connections and skills. Co-ownership of alcohol-related businesses may have been common. For example, black immigrants Hedley Ward and Wilfred Brown co-owned a juke joint in Puerto Barrios that had a license to sell liquor until 9:00 p.m. Municipal judges' records from Izabal describe Brown as single, a machinist, illiterate, and employed as an "Urban Police Agent" in Puerto Barrios.⁸¹

While the existing records about immigrant bar owners on the Caribbean Coast are patchy at best, they do make it clear that places like Zacapa and Puerto Barrios offered migrant workers an opportunity to pursue upward mobility by catering to the needs of other workers. More important, they served as important indicators that a given immigrant had put down roots

on the Caribbean Coast. Juke joint ownership meant that a person had decided to become an expatriate.

Consumption Habits and the Culture of Alcohol

IRCA and UFCO workers, the majority of them immigrants, spent many leisure hours in juke joints and honky-tonks like the ones described above. As mentioned earlier, juke joints served as social outlets and entertainment maroons that allowed men and women to escape and relax with friends. The drinking that happened in juke joints provided what Smith calls "an alcoholic marronage, a temporary relief from social inequalities, which probably hindered organized efforts to resist" labor exploitation.⁸² Historically, U. S. railroad workers made drinking an important part of their working-class culture. Drinking provided them with a temporary escape from the hazards of the job, as well as a fraternal activity that fostered worker solidarity. They would drink to share industry news, forget mishaps on the job, and to cope with tormenting supervisors and company officials.⁸³ As in the rural Caribbean and southern United States, the spirit of the juke joint and the drinking that occurred there permeated black immigrant culture on the Caribbean coast of Central America. In these maroons, friends

and coworkers could eat, talk, gossip, hear music, dance, gamble, and drink.⁸⁴

Several scholars have discussed the meaning of excessive drinking. Smith argues that poor working and living conditions, frustrations, anxieties, and a lack of occupational fulfillment led to excessive drinking in the Caribbean.⁸⁵ Historian Ronald Takaki interprets excessive drinking among Asian immigrant workers on plantations in Hawaii around the same time as this study. He argues that excessive drinking enabled immigrant workers to escape the reality of years of separation from family and community.⁸⁶ One sees similar trends in Caribbean Guatemala. Virginia Garrard-Burnett aptly point out in the conclusion to this volume that as a Catholic nation Guatemala did not have the same restraints on alcohol as the immigrants' Protestant home communities. Similarly, prior to World War II the Caribbean coast had a largely working class male milieu with few familiar restraints on drinking such as protestant women in one's kinship network.

Another interpretation of the role of alcohol among Caribbean coast immigrants comes from anthropologist Stanley Brandes' work on drinking and working class male identity politics across the Guatemalan border in Mexico. He contends that "Mexican men demonstrate friendship through drink."⁸⁷ Manhood and drinking are so closely related that "most men in

the Mexican laboring classes—come to associate imbibing and inebriation with male identity.”⁸⁸ One observes similar male ideology and behavior in Caribbean Guatemala. A final interpretation of the role of excessive drinking comes from Smith who found that drinking emboldened the marginalized to challenge “social-structural inequalities” and their bosses. In short, excessive drinking encouraged the less powerful to attack the more powerful.⁸⁹ In Caribbean Guatemala excessive drinking played a decisive role in causing labor strikes and confrontations between workers and company and government officials.

An unknown state department official in Honduras told assistant secretary of state Robert Bacon, “Since I have been in charge of this Consulate . . . almost the entire number of arrests of Americans here, are of negroes who are frequently drunk and disorderly, and almost invariably resist arrest, and it is almost impossible to convince them that they should submit and go quietly, when arrested.”⁹⁰ Similar disrespect of those in authority occurred across the border in Guatemala among banana plantation workers in Quirigua. V. M Peralta, an agent of the Northern Railroad, reported, “one of the many [drunkards] ran over me at my office” in the Puerto Barrios train station, adding, “This morning the drunkenness was horrible, station employees see this regularly.”⁹¹

It would be foolish to argue here that excessive drinking generally advanced the interest of workers. Historian Aviva Chomsky argues for example that the abuse of alcohol and violence against other workers seemed "to be a way of turning dissatisfaction and resentment inward, or onto other workers, instead of organizing for any kind of effective change in the unsatisfactory situation."⁹² Railroad, banana, and government officials on the Caribbean Coast expressed an aversion to paydays because they often became times of disorderly conduct and bloody fights similar to the fights Langston Hughes describes in the juke joint section of Stanton, Kansas and Zora Neal Hurston describes in Jacksonville and the Everglades of Florida. Former UFCO foreman John Williams recalled that on payday, several fights were likely to "occur due to the vicious native liquor that is cheap and as powerful as T. N. T." He went on to say that on payday, gambling and the "terrible native liquor" caused "the racial feelings [to] break out."⁹³ In the final analysis, when workers drank too much and fought each other, their behavior undermined worker solidarity and attempts to improve working and living conditions.

Conclusion

Analyzing the trade in and consumption of *aguardiente* provides interesting insights into culture, class, and race on the Caribbean Coast of Guatemala and Honduras. By 1922, the UFCO and IRCA frontier towns and port communities of the region had reputations as places full of bars, saloons, and raggedy Louisiana and Mississippi style junk joints and honky-tonks catering to quick-tempered immigrants. Here, as in other places around the world where migrant workers congregated, the immigrant workforce exhibited the characteristics of "lowdown" cultural identity: these were men who turned to gambling, drinking, and womanizing as a source of escape, solace, and entertainment.⁹⁴ For black migrant workers who decided to put down roots and stay, the sale of *aguardiente*, whether legal or illegal, provided a pathway to better opportunities.

¹ Cunningham, *Gypsying through Central America*, 40.

² Opie, "Black Americans and the State in Turn-of-the-Century Guatemala," 608-609.

³ Opie, *Black Labor Migration in Caribbean Guatemala, 1882-1923*, 14.

⁴ Hurt, ed., *African American Life in the rural South, 1900-1950*, 123; Nardone, "Roomful of Blues," 167, 169, 173.

⁵ Arnold, "Which way to the honky-tonk?" 19.

⁶ Wilson, *Crab Antics*, 166.

⁷ Wilson, *Crab Antics*, 166.

⁸ Lacoste, "Wine and Women," 363.

⁹ Wilson, *Crab Antics*, 166.

¹⁰ Smith, *Caribbean Rum*, 244.

¹¹ Ibid., 17; Peiss, *Cheap Amusements*, 17.

¹² Opie, *Black Labor Migration in Caribbean Guatemala*, 11.

¹³ Opie, *Black Labor Migration in Caribbean Guatemala*, 41, 54; Putnam, "Eventually Alien," 284-285, 288; Harpelle, "Whites Zones," 307-312.

¹⁴ Smith, *Caribbean Rum*, 125.

¹⁵ Hurt, ed., *African American Life in the rural South, 1900-1950*, 12; Nardone, "Roomful of Blues," 169.

¹⁶ Opie, *Black Labor Migration in Caribbean Guatemala*, 16-21.

¹⁷ Ibid., 21.

¹⁸ United States National Archives II, College Park, Maryland (hereafter USNA), record group (hereafter RG) 84, vol. 18, Frank Dennis to N. G. Hunter Jr., vice and deputy consular general, Guatemala, June 1, 1901, Livingston.

¹⁹ Opie, "Adios Jim Crow," 109.

²⁰ USNA, RG 84, vol. 13, p. 230, Reed to the Galveston Chamber of Commerce, Galveston, Texas, May 11, 1908, Livingston.

²¹ USNA, RG 84, vol. 13, p. 230, Reed to the Galveston Chamber of Commerce, Galveston, Texas, May 11, 1908, Livingston.

²² USNA, RG 84, vol. 26, Reed to C. C. Hoard, Celeste, Texas, December 15, 1909, Livingston.

²³ AGCA, Ministerio de Fomento (hereafter MF), Leg. 15813, José M. Amerlinck to F. C. García, Puerto Barrios, December 4, 1895.

²⁴ USNA, RG 59, box 3838, Wilson to the Secretary of State, Washington, June 17, 1912.

²⁵ Opie, "Adios Jim Crow," 118-19.

²⁶ Daniel, *Lost Revolutions*, 121-125.

²⁷ Hughes, *Not Without Laughter*, 218.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 218.

²⁹ Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 149.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 149.

³¹ Yentsch, "Excavating the South's African American Food History," 84.

³² *Ibid.*, 85.

³³ Opie, "Afro-North American Migration to Latin America, 1880-1932," 12.

³⁴ Yentsch, "Excavating the South's African American Food History," 85.

³⁵ Opie, "Adios Jim Crow," 137.

³⁶ Yentsch, "Excavating the South's African American Food History," 85.

³⁷ AGCA, MF IRCA, leg. 15872, V. M. Peralta Agente del Ferrocarril a Comandante de Armas, Puerto Barrios; Admor de Rentas; Gerente General, May 9, 1922, Estacion de Quirigua, Izabal.

³⁸ Opie, "Adios Jim Crow," 20-21.

³⁹ Opie, "Adios Jim Crow," 141-43.

⁴⁰ USNA, RG 84, vol. 40, Affidavit de Simon Shine, September 20, 1907, Livingston.

⁴¹ AGCA, Jefatura Politica de Izabal Records (hereafter JPI), 1913, Juzgado Municipal de Puerto Barrios a Jefatura Política y Nominas de Izabal, "Criminal contra el presente reo de asesinated Wilfred Brown, en la persona de Jorge Morrison agente de Policia," September 1913, Puerto Barrios.

⁴² USNA, RG 59, box 3838, Cutter to Sands, March 24, 1910.

⁴³ Opie, "Adios Jim Crow," 119.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Williams, "The Rise of the Banana Industry and Its Influence on Caribbean Countries," 36.

⁴⁶ Opie, "Foreign Workers, Debt Peonage and Frontier Culture in Lowland Guatemala, 1884 to 1900," 42.

⁴⁷ Chomsky, *West Indian Workers and the United Fruit Company in Costa Rica, 1870-1940*, 175.

⁴⁸ AGCA, MF Correspondencia de Los Contratistas del Ferrocarriles 1897, legajo 15819, H. Boiault to Minister of Development, February 20, 1897, Guatemala.

⁴⁹ Roberts, *On The Earthquake Line*, 44.

⁵⁰ AGCA, MF, FN, leg. B106-1, Ricardo Barthel Gerente, General Manager, Central American Improvement Co., Inc, to the Ministro de Fomento, October 3, 1901, Guatemala.

⁵¹ AGCA, MF, FCN, legajo B106-1, Barthel to Minister of Development, October 26, 1901.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ USNA, RG 84, vol. 38, pp. 1-5, Albert W. Brickwood Jr., American Consulate, Puerto Cortes, to Hugh S. Gibson, Secretary, American Legation Tegucigalpa, Puerto Cortes, Honduras, January 19, 1909.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ USNA, RG 84, vol. 3, Vice and deputy consul to Robert Bacon, assistant secretary of state, American Tegucigalpa, February 22, 1907, Puerto Cortes, Honduras.

⁵⁶ Foster, *A Gringo in Manana-Land*, 211.

⁵⁷ Nardone, "Roomful of Blues," 167.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 169.

⁵⁹ Winter, *Guatemala and Her People of Today*, 147-48.

⁶⁰ Ruhl, *The Central Americans*, 222-23.

⁶¹ AGCA, Ministro de Gobernación y Justicia (hereafter MGJ), leg. 28964, ex. 1787, Juan Paz Tomas to the Secretaria de Fomento a Ministro de Gobernación y Justicia, July 11, 1898, Guatemala.

⁶² AGCA, MGJ, leg. 28935, 1897, Elias Estrada, Jefatura Política de Zacapa to the Ministerio de Gobernación y Justicia, MGJ, February 2, 1897, Zacapa; AGCA, MGJ, leg. 28935, 1897, Juzgado de 1a Instancia del Dept de Zacapa a MGJ, February 4, 1897, Zacapa.

⁶³ USNA, RG 84, vol. 93, Owen to Dennis, February 10, 1897, Livingston.

⁶⁴ USNA, RG 59, roll 5, no. 41, Whitehouse to Porter, May 24, 1885.

⁶⁵ USNA, RG 84, vol. 76, Dennis to Beaupré, September 2, 1898.

⁶⁶ Cunningham, *Gypsying*, 237.

⁶⁷ USNA, RG 84, vol. 72, Dennis to Pringle, November 5, 1897.

⁶⁸ USNA, RG 84, vol. 171, Affidavit of James Wilson, May 11, 1910, Guatemala City, RG 84, vol. 153; P. L. Moore to Edward Reed, August 21, 1913, Zacapa.

⁶⁹ USNA, RG 84, vol. 72, Dennis to Pringle, November 5, 1897, Livingston.

⁷⁰ USNA, RG 84, vol. 40, Affidavit of George Walters, September 16, 1907, Livingston.

⁷¹ Opie, "Black Americans and the State," 604.

⁷² USNA, RG 84, vol. 126, Edward Karlson to American Minister, Guatemala City, June 19, 1908, Zacapa.

⁷³ Cunningham, *Gypsying*, 239-40.

⁷⁴ Opie, *Black Labor Migration*, 13-14.

⁷⁵ *El Norte*, April 20, 1893; AGCA, MF, leg. 15813, Amerlinck to García, December 4, 1895, Puerto Barrios.

⁷⁶ Latin American Library, Tulane University, Rare Book and Manuscript Department, New Orleans, Louisiana, William T. Penny, "Notes and Comments on Travels Through Mexico and Central America, being the personal happenings to and experiences of yours sincerely," (Guatemala City, 1913), 68. AGCA, MF, leg. 15819, Pennypacker to Amerlinck, November 11, 1897, Zacapa; AGCA, Zacapa, p. 1, MF, leg. 15821, R. H. May and Pennybacker to Amerlinck, September 21, 1898.

⁷⁷ Winter, *Guatemala and Her People*, 146.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 129.

⁷⁹ Asturias, *Strong Wind*, 30.

⁸⁰ USNA, RG 84, vol. 184, Reed to Owen, January 20, 1910; , RG 84, vol. 184, Reed to Owen, enclosure no. 1.

⁸¹ AGCA, JPI, 1913, Juzgado Municipal de Puerto Barrios a Jefatura Política y Nominas de Izabal, "Criminal contra el presente reo de asesinated Wilfred Brown, en la persona de Jorge Morrison agente de Policia," September 1913, Puerto Barrios.

⁸² Smith, *Caribbean Rum*, 167.

⁸³ Licht, *Working for the Railroad*, 238.

⁸⁴ Hurt, ed., *African American Life in the Rural South, 1900-1950*, 123; Yentsch, "Excavating the South's African American Food History," 84.

⁸⁵ Smith, *Caribbean Rum*, 140.

⁸⁶ Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore*, 145.

⁸⁷ Brandes, "Drink, Abstinence, and Male Identity in Mexico City," 155.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 156.

⁸⁹ Smith, *Caribbean Rum*, 118, 158-159, quote from page 118.

⁹⁰ USNA, RG 84, vol. 3, Vice and Deputy Consul to Robert Bacon, Assistant Secretary of State, February 22, 1907, Puerto Cortes, Honduras.

⁹¹ AGCA, MF IRCA, leg. 15872, V. M. Peralta, Agente del Ferrocarril a Comandante de Armas, Puerto Barrios; Admor de Rentas; Gerente General, May 9, 1922, Estacion de Quirigua, Izabal.

⁹² Chomsky, *West Indian Workers*, 175.

⁹³ Williams, "The Rise of the Banana Industry," 34, 121.

⁹⁴ Opie, "Adios Jim Crow," 120-21.