

Basketball Trafficking

Stolen Black Panamanian Dreams

Javier
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To all the young people in pursuit of their dreams

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Introduction

“¡Saca rápido!” (Get it in quickly!), the coach yelled from the sideline, hoping the players would inbound the ball quickly after giving up another bucket. His pleas, however, were lost on the players, who passed the ball sluggishly back in bounds, eating time off the clock in a game that was over before it began. The opposing team, Las Panteras (the Panthers), had destroyed their will to even finish the competition.

“Ball!” Tito, one of the star players of Las Panteras, a longtime Panama-based private basketball academy, called out to his teammate as he leaped into the air in front of his opponent. Since joining the academy years before, Tito had played basketball in more parts of the country and the world than anyone in his household could ever have imagined, including going on a trip to Washington, DC, in 2017, when he and I first met, that ultimately transformed his life. Tonight, in 2020, back in Panama City, his teammate answered the call by throwing the ball high in the air with such precision that Tito easily grabbed it and laid it in the rim for the final victorious alley-oop.

Summertime in Panama City was nearing an end, and the evening crowd at a popular public park on Via Argentina, one of the city’s liveliest streets, was still energized as Tito and four of his teammates hurried to change out of their sweaty uniforms postvictory. They were rushing to catch the metro headed to Albrook National Transportation Terminal, the capital’s biggest bus terminal, to take the evening’s last one-hour bus ride across the isthmus to their Atlantic coast city, Colón.

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Seeing Tito play at the park that evening reminded me of when his mother jokingly told me, “He is your son.” He was not my son. I was less than twelve years his senior. Tito had grown up with both of his parents and had a great relationship with his father. However, I was proud to see him play and felt a sense of responsibility and love as if I had known him my entire life.

Maybe the two years we had spent in each other’s lives from morning to night, between Panama and eventually Austin, Texas, made me feel this way. Looking at the now legal adult standing in front of me evoked these emotions. The peach fuzz I remembered sprouting on his sixteen-year-old face was starting to darken and thicken around his jawline, and the muscle mass on his body was increasing.

“Una foto,” I requested of him, capturing the moment on my cell phone’s camera the same way I had when I last saw him in December 2019 at the Dallas airport, with hopes that I would soon see him back in Texas with a new F-1 student visa to attend junior college. Two years before that, in September 2017, Tito had first arrived in the United States on an athletic scholarship to play high school basketball, an experience that eventually became marked by exploitation and abuse. Ultimately, Tito’s scholarship at the private school was revoked by his coach, supposedly based on his academic performance. After that, Tito moved in with my family in Austin and enrolled in public school, slowly piecing his new life and basketball career back together until we were surprised by President Donald J. Trump’s 2018 Memorandum on Combating High Nonimmigrant Overstay Rates. With so much uncertainty looming on the horizon, my family and I supported Tito by helping him search for a college basketball scholarship that would allow him to stay in the United States. He received an opportunity to attend a junior college on a new student visa. However, this never happened: When he returned to Panama for the visa adjudication, he was denied reentry to the United States.

Our paths had reconverged tonight. Tito stood there drenched in sweat, his light blue uniform sagging from his shoulders and waist. As usual when he was being photographed, Tito did not smile. Instead, he clenched his lips tighter, trying to hide the new braces aimed to correct a childhood issue. For me, the simple act of photographing him at this moment reminded me of what we shared and why I had decided to become a part of his life.

Before I met Tito, I met his mother, Katia, at a basketball tournament I organized as the athletic director of an elite international high school in Panama City. Katia worked the statistics table at that tournament, keeping track of all the vital points throughout the games. Besides the official statistics sheets, Katia also carried a small packet that included a letter detailing

how her son's Panama City-based basketball academy, Las Panteras, had been invited to a recruiting camp in Washington, DC.

Accompanying the letter were pictures of Tito, who attended the basketball academy on a scholarship, in the many different uniforms he had donned during his relatively short but highly successful teenage basketball career. There was even a photo of him with "PANAMA" displayed across his chest from when he was a member of the national Panamanian juvenile basketball team. Katia handed me the packet, and as I flipped through it, she interrupted me to show me a cell phone video of her son dunking a basketball. Despite my amazement at all the recorded accomplishments, I kept returning to one picture of Tito dressed in a celestial blue uniform with gold trim. It read "COLÓN" across the chest.

"The kids from Colón are the best players, but they never get to travel for these showcases and special trips," she said, highlighting how rare the opportunity Tito had been granted through his academy was.

I nodded my head, deeply understanding the truth in her statement. My own father is from Colón, and when I first moved to Panama in 2012, I lived in Colón as well. After only a year, however, I abandoned the life I had carved there in search of more money and opportunities in Panama's capital city.

In that moment I made my decision. I wanted to support Tito with not just this first trip to DC but his continued basketball career by donating funds for him to become spatially mobile and increase his opportunities of being seen by coaches in the United States.

I was excited to call my father, who had left Panama for Texas in 1974 on a tennis scholarship and an F-1 student visa, and tell him about Tito. On hearing Tito's story, my father reminisced on his youth playing tennis in Colón before attending Huston-Tillotson University, a historically Black university in Austin. He detailed how athletes in Colón were underfunded by the Panamanian sports ministry compared to those in Panama City and faced many financial barriers that prevented them from accessing similar opportunities to travel. He recalled how his uncles and family friends pooled their resources to buy him an airplane ticket because his parents could not afford to send him to *el norte* (the north, that is, the United States). There was an almost fifty-year gap between his time in Panama and Tito's, but the narratives were strikingly similar. Seeing himself reflected in Tito's story, my father decided that he also wanted to support Tito and funded his trip to Washington, DC, in a gesture to pay it forward.

Tito had a great time at the camp in Washington, DC, where he and Yohanis, one of his best friends, were treated like special guests. This trip

was not the first time their athletic talents supplemented the less talented paying members of their Panama City-based youth basketball academy.

In the months after he got back from DC, I met with Tito several times, mainly at Gimnasio Kiwanis, the gym where I first met his mother. He practiced there with his basketball academy twice a week in the evenings before returning to Colón. After the camp in DC and a successful international basketball competition in the Dominican Republic shortly after, Coach Barrigon (a pseudonym), the head basketball coach at Tech Prep (also a pseudonym), a private high school in Texas, offered Tito a basketball scholarship.

Katia ensured that I was among the first to know about this new development in their lives. We were thrilled. The excitement was short-lived, however, when we discovered that the scholarship would cover only 80 percent of the tuition. Tito's family would need to contribute the remaining balance plus an additional \$100 per month for living expenses. Once again, limited economic resources surfaced as a barrier to Tito's developing US hoop dream.

After I conferred with my father, we decided to support Tito's family with the additional costs. With that, Tito was off, and so was I. Traveling to La Frontera ("The Border," a pseudonym I use for the city to preserve anonymity) brought Tito to Texas for the first time. I would also be traveling back to Texas to pursue a doctorate at the University of Texas at Austin and reunite with my father after living in Panama for more than five years.

In mid-September 2017, on a scorching central Texas day, I picked up Tito, who arrived in the United States some days after me, from the Austin airport. Tito and I decided that before heading to La Frontera, he would make a two-day stop in Austin. After meeting my parents, visiting the Texas state capitol, and sitting in on several university lectures with me, he was en route to his new home.

For a while, things seemed to go well, but in retrospect, there were warning signs from the beginning, particularly surrounding academics. Within Tito's first month at Tech, academic performance became a point of contention for us since I believed that he was wasting his opportunity, per the information I received from Coach Barrigon. Before leaving Panama, Tito and I had had numerous conversations about him using this basketball opportunity to get a US education. Coach Barrigon reached out to me when Tito was not performing up to par academically in his new all-English advanced placement school. My tipping point came when I received a text message from the coach informing me that he was revoking Tito's scholarship due to poor academic performance. Following an argument, I decided

to listen to Tito's version of events. On the tense phone call, Tito reluctantly explained how Tech was not providing him with any of the promised additional support. Moreover, he explained that Coach Barrigon's real gripe was with his *athletic* performance. Coach Barrigon expected Tito to become a leading point scorer immediately on his arrival at Tech. However, Tito could not meet the unrealistic expectation of scoring eighteen points per game, a quota set unfairly by the coach. Tensions continued to rise when the coach described Tito as a "damaged" player. Coach Barrigon accused Tito's Panamanian coach and his mother of sending him to La Frontera with secret hopes that Tech would cover the cost of a knee operation.

Tito's hesitant confession, which clearly eased a burden he was carrying, completely stunned me. I was transported back to my collegiate athletic days when I had witnessed something similar. Per National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) rules, coaches could not get rid of a player because of their athletic performance. However, through surveillance, they could use other infractions such as poor academic performance to justify getting rid of a player or revoking their athletic scholarship (Comeaux 2018). It became clear to me that Tito was in a similar situation as an F-1 student visa holder. While there are no provisions for removal based on lack of athletic talent, a sponsoring institution can revoke a student's visa if they are not passing their classes.

Less than three months following Tito's arrival in Texas, I was on the phone with Katia, who was asking me to take care of her child and bring him to live with me in Austin. Things continued to spiral out of control. We soon discovered that Tito was not just struggling to keep up with his schoolwork in the new all-English academic environment. We also found that he was enduring deplorable living conditions, being fed inadequately, living under threats of being forcefully removed from the country, and being verbally and psychologically abused. All this was being done to him by the same person we had entrusted with his care and advancement: Coach Barrigon. Tito was almost completely alone, and losing his scholarship also meant losing his legal status in the United States.

From that fateful day, basketball trafficking became our lived reality and redirected the course of our lives. I first encountered the term in news stories, but I have come to define *basketball trafficking* as the exploitative and unregulated migration of youth to the United States through international interscholastic athletic programs, which, in many instances, begins with being awarded an F-1 student visa. I could have never imagined that Tito would travel from La Frontera back to Austin with a newly acquired

“out-of-status” immigration classification. More important, he was not alone. As other news stories reported, there were many more young people like him across the United States with similar out-of-status classifications who had entered the United States on F-1 student visas to pursue their American hoop dreams, which, on arrival, turned into nightmares. Even at Tech, Tito was not alone. In the housing where Tito lived in La Frontera, there were eight international noncitizen teenagers in total. Two were from Panama, another two from Mexico, and four from Costa Rica, all living in deplorable conditions in near silence. We found out only when Katia’s childhood friend from Panama, who was living in La Frontera, informed us about the kids’ real living conditions. When asked how things were going, Tito always answered simply “bien” (good).

According to the US Department of Homeland Security (2013), “Human trafficking involves the use of force, fraud, or coercion to obtain some type of labor or commercial sex act.” Yet, once Tito acquired his out-of-status classification and we sought assistance in the pro bono immigration space, most officials who work to protect migrants and trafficked persons could not think of someone like Tito as a victim of trafficking. They were puzzled by the notion that basketball could be a form of trafficking, and this limited the legal relief Tito was qualified to receive.

I was exhausted and nearly at my wit’s end in the search for help before—seemingly following a divine intervention—we found someone who could help. At a nonprofit resettlement service in Austin, two caseworkers with decades of experience immediately recognized Tito’s plight. Their professional experiences working with countless victimized individuals made it clear that Coach Barrigon’s control over Tito’s cell phone, the long abusive late-night tirades, the points-per-game quota, the threats to send him back to Panama, and the offers to work in his auto body shop in exchange for shoes and other necessities indeed represented a form of human trafficking.

The caseworkers even submitted Tito’s application for assistance to the Administration for Children and Families’ Office on Trafficking in Persons. The office determined that through basketball Tito may have been subjected to a severe form of trafficking in persons and that he was entitled to seek federal relief. However, this assistance came just a bit too late, as Tito had already left the country due to Trump’s 2018 memorandum, forfeiting relief, as defined by the administration, to attempt to get a new student visa and attend junior college.

This book follows Tito’s narrative to shed light on basketball trafficking. First and foremost, *Basketball Trafficking* demonstrates that young,

healthy, strong Black males can be the victims of trafficking, even if they do not fit the typical image of a trafficking victim (gendered female and sexually exploited). It is urgent to contend with these realities because similar cases of kids being trafficked on basketball dreams have surfaced in the mainstream media, such as that of Souleymane Doumbia from the Ivory Coast. Souleymane was one of over seventy kids trafficked by the Evelyn Mack Academy in North Carolina, shuffled around the country without proper migratory status, and deported from the United States. It is harder for young Black men who do not fit the constructed image of a human trafficking victim to get relief.

In a contemporary sense, Tito represents the large number of youth who have become spatially mobile at younger ages to fuel the growing athletic industrial complex (AIC), which depends on the athletic labor of Black boys to function (Runstedtler 2018). Historian Theresa Runstedtler argues that big businesses such as Nike, the NBA (National Basketball Association), and other media companies not only benefit from young Black American boys' athletic labor but also take advantage of Black boys' lack of access to good-quality public education, their diminished job prospects, and their early exposure to the criminal justice system, which often pushes them into certain sports, such as basketball, as a way to achieve upward social mobility. Strategic marketing by these companies presents rags-to-riches stories that make it seem like hard work will allow these boys to overcome their circumstances.

As the game of basketball becomes more global, targeted efforts to capture the attention of young Black boys and their families all over the world present an American hoop dream as a viable option to circumvent their social positioning. For instance, the Jordan Brand commercials set in Parisian suburbs featuring Black youth use similar imagery and messaging: the rags-to-riches narrative and the idea that hard work in basketball will help them overcome marginality in French society. There is also the multiyear, multimillion-dollar exclusive rights deal that the International Basketball Federation (FIBA) struck with Nike to clothe players head to toe at official competitions. Additionally, there are the NBA's efforts to expand its presence through NBA Academies, where they identify, train, and house top talent in one of three academies located in Mexico City (NBA Academy Latin America); Saly, Senegal (NBA Academy Africa); and Canberra, Australia (NBA Global Academy). The NBA also hosts a vast array of Basketball Without Borders camps globally to identify talent and funnel them through their pipeline, all the while introducing the game to a larger audience and creating fans through a development lens.

In this book I make sense of how Tito navigates the complexities of migration, legal status, exploitation, and athletic recruitment from my experiences with him both in Panama and in the United States. I also look at how he makes sense of himself, particularly his racial and athletic identities as a transnational youth athlete from Latin America. I contextualize why Tito's subjectivity is used to represent the issues that impact many Black Panamanian boys. Particular attention is placed on the criminalization, surveillance, and policing of their bodies and neighborhoods. As in the United States, the construction of Black Panamanian boys as "superpredators" in Panama—heartless, senseless criminals with no morals—informs policies, programs, and interactions that negatively impact them (Rios 2011). They experience and witness different forms of institutionalized violence daily. The Panamanian police force often appears in photos at charity events supposedly aimed at helping intentionally marginalized communities. Yet they engage with Black communities in riot gear, wielding deadly assault weapons, and institute *toques de queda* (curfews) where they routinely and selectively round up Black boys and carry them off to police stations, causing confusion and worry among their parents. When the police reports on these efforts, they often present them as a necessary security measure. Yet the parents' and communities' complaints of ill treatment are often ignored (Lowe de Goodin 2014).

"Andi"

"How was the game?" I asked Tito and his sweaty teammates after the Via Argentina match in Panama City.

"Trash!" Chambers, one of Tito's teammates, yelled back in English, making everyone laugh. Tito and Las Panteras had controlled the game from every aspect, dominating their opponents by forty points.

Tito's near six-foot muscular body forcefully, but seemingly with ease, drove the ball down the paint, laying it up in the hoop. The dark brown skin that is Tito's badge of *negritud* (Blackness) closely matched his teammates' but collided against the lighter hues of his mestizo opponents. Throughout the evening Tito's teammates exclaimed "#Money" when someone made a clean shot and "Andi" when someone drew a foul on a point driving to the basket.

Las Panteras had a competitive advantage because they had been strategically pieced together over the years by Panamanian basketball coaches and basketball academy owners. Tito and a few others had been selected as

members of the national Panamanian juvenile basketball team beginning in their early teens. They were the country's best basketball athletes in their age group in an academy of their own, and they traveled around the region competing against high-level opponents. But they were in Panama and not in the United States, where the real money for basketball is.

That evening match on Via Argentina was like many others for Black Panamanian teenagers searching for class mobility through sports. They hustle up and down basketball courts across the isthmus getting better, winning games, and receiving recognition in order to create more economic opportunities in their lives. They are willing to play the game nearly anywhere, as long as it creates the desired opportunity. Sometimes that means traveling to play in neighborhood parks hours away from home, like on the evening described in this introduction or moving to another school across the country to be on a stronger basketball team. For years, they battle early morning traffic jams and extremely late returns home to leave it all on the court.

Tito came to love basketball at the age of eleven. His first athletic passion was *fútbol*, as for many youth in Panama. Soccer reigns supreme in the country, and it occupied Tito's thinking until his father introduced him to basketball, where he excelled immediately and found a variety of opportunities, including transferring from Colón to a school in Panama City on an athletic scholarship. Coach Mendoza, Las Panteras' owner and principal coach, noticed Tito's talents, recruited him to the national youth team, and facilitated his move to Panama City. It was in Coach Mendoza's best interest to bring Tito to Panama City so he could be with the other team members who also had athletic scholarships. Being in the same building made it easier to develop the team's talent.

At seventeen, Tito was one of the top five players in Panama in his age range. However, the three-pointers he became famous for sinking across the Central American nation did not matter in the sea of over half a million boys in his age range fighting for top rankings in the United States. If Rivals or MaxPreps, the premiere US-based high school sports ranking sources, ranked top basketball prospects in Panama, Tito would surely have been on that list. His years competing on Panama's national team made it clear that he had a level of talent and prestige, but those accolades were not recognized in the United States. When Tito attended Tech Prep on an F-1 student visa, he became one of the many unknown student-athletes included in the over eighty thousand students holding F-1 visas at the K-12 level (US Immigration and Customs Enforcement 2020). His basketball prowess became invisible, like his new life in *el norte*.

Despite his relative invisibility in US basketball circuits, Tito was nonetheless “getting known,” which Scott Brooks (2009, 23) describes as a complex process and network where labor, spatial movement, and luck are necessary to gain exposure and recognition. Gaining international recognition at the 2017 FIBA under-seventeen (U17) Centrobasket Dominican Republic tournament enabled Tito to transcend his borders and try his luck in the world’s pinnacle basketball locale: the United States. However, basketball also became the source of his exploitation and victimization once stateside.

Throughout the Via Argentina match, Tito and his Black Panamanian teammates, mostly monolingual Spanish speakers but with historical connections to the English language because of their Black West Indian roots, exclaimed basketball terms in English. *And1* was the term that most caught my attention. When they yelled it out on the court, I was immediately transported back to my childhood days, when my brother and I would find ways to get copies of the *AND1 Mixtapes* on VHS. The *AND1 Mixtapes* were entertaining and instructive compilations of streetball highlights featuring primarily Black males with nicknames such as Skip to My Lou, Hot Sauce, and Escalade. Many said that the *AND1* players violated the sport’s official rulebook. They blurred the thin line between an infraction and a legal move. I, however, thought that they inventively remixed the rules of basketball like the rap mixtapes playing in the background. It was riveting. That night on Via Argentina, when Black Panamanian youth barely old enough to know what a VHS tape is exclaimed “*And1*,” I was forced to confront what it means to be a Black basketball player defined by geopolitical borders that require passports and visas to play the game beyond where one is born.

Being a Black basketball player of West Indian ancestry in Panama is especially important to highlight given West Indians migrated to Panama by the thousands to labor in the construction of and around the Panama Canal. They navigated questions of citizenship and belonging between Panama and one of the United States’ neocolonies, the US Panama Canal Zone, known locally as the Canal Zone, in the country’s capital. Established in 1903, the ten-mile stretch of land cemented divisions within the nation. The near-sovereign US territory imposed a racial hierarchy relegating Black folks, the majority of West Indian origin, to performing the most dangerous forms of labor as well as staffing the railroad, dock facilities, and low-level clerical and administrative positions (Frenkel 2002). However, the movement and meeting of the Black diaspora in the Canal Zone, including many Black Americans, would eventually shape Tito’s twenty-first-century basketball pursuits and American hoop dreams.

An article headline detailing famed American basketball coach William “Bill” Yancey’s arrival in Panama in the April 3, 1937, edition of the *Indianapolis Recorder* read “‘Bill’ Yancey Is Idolized by Youth of Panama as Work Begins to Shape.” The Black-owned newspaper further elaborated on Yancey’s reception by Black Panamanians: “His first introduction to Panama colored society was in the form of a stag party given in his honor and sponsored by George Washington Westerman, sportsman, writer and author of the ‘Passing Review,’ a weekly column.”

On March 1, 1937, about a month prior to the publication of that article, ss *Virginia* had anchored in the Port of Cristóbal, carrying Yancey and his wife. A small group of friends welcomed them, including the local representative of the Negro Associated Press and George Westerman, who was described by the West Indian News section of the *Panama American* newspaper as “one of the men responsible for his tour of duty down here” (1937b). In the preceding months, the West Indian News and the News of the Colored Community sections of the *Panama American* newspaper had built the excitement leading up to Yancey’s arrival. And rightfully so: Panama had secured the talent of the renowned athletic standout from Philadelphia. On March 7, 1937, in the West Indian News section of the *Panama American*, George Westerman wrote:

This new comer to Panama has become famous in North America. Entering the ranks of professional basketball with the Renaissance Quintet in 1928, “Billy” Yancey is said to have developed into one of the greatest Negro guards in the history of the floor game. With his refreshing speed and great effectiveness, he rose to stardom almost in a split second and his continued successes enabled him to remain in the rarefied atmosphere of basketball greats, irrespective of color, right up to January 18 when he left his team at Cincinnati to accept the proposition which caused him to be at present on the Isthmus.

Yancey was both a baseball and basketball legend and former team member of the New York Rens, considered to be “the colored Champs of basketball of the world” (*Panama American* 1937a). George Westerman and other Black Panamanian coaches and leaders principally recruited him to Panama to coach the multiracial Panamanian Olympic baseball and basketball teams. Yancey was a hit among local youth and found immediate success, as reported by the Black press. When the 1938 Central American and Caribbean Games rolled around, he coached Panama’s women’s basketball team to their first international gold medal. In addition to leading



FIGURE 1.1. The New York Rens, a dominant 1930s Black professional basketball team. *Left to right:* Clarence “Fat” Jenkins, Bill Yancey, John Holt, James “Pappy” Ricks, Eyre “Bruiser” Saitch, Charles “Tarzan” Cooper, Wee Willie Smith, and team founder Bob Douglas (*inset*). Bill Yancey later moved to Panama to develop basketball, baseball, and other sports in Panama. Biblioteca Nacional de Panamá.

the Panamanian squads to victory, Yancey was a conduit connecting Panama’s Black sporting networks with those of the United States, particularly the sporting congregations of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) (White 2019).

To be clear, Yancey was a conduit, not the creator of these diasporic networks. On his arrival in Panama, he joined the Black coaches and physical educators across the Canal Zone and the broader republic, who were already using sport to determine their places within Panama and forge better opportunities beyond the isthmus, mainly in the United States.

Aston M. Parchment was one of the physical educators and coaches already actively developing Panama’s Black sporting scene and connecting local youth to international opportunities before Yancey’s arrival. Born in Jamaica but raised in the Canal Zone, Parchment became a physical education teacher and activist in the Canal Zone. He also started Club Mercurio, one of Panama’s top private athletic clubs that trained the republic’s first international champions, particularly in track and field.



FIGURE 1.2. Coach Aston M. Parchment, pictured in 1941 with an athletic trophy at his desk in the former US Panama Canal Zone. Parchment was the founder of Club Mercurio. Aston M. Parchment Scrapbook, Museo Afrocaribeño de Panamá, Ministerio de Cultura (Panamá).

Not only did Club Mercurio secure Olympic medals; it also facilitated educational and athletic opportunities beyond the isthmus for Black youth. Parchment successfully sent Black Panamanian athletes to HBCUs. He coached track stars Jennings Blackett, Clayton Clarke, and other Black Panamanians who went on to Xavier University of Louisiana. Once at Xavier, they were coached by renowned African American Olympian and professor Ralph Metcalfe. Parchment also coached Charlotte Gooden, who obtained a track scholarship to Tuskegee University and became one of the first women in Panama's history to participate in a Summer Olympics. She did this alongside Lorraine Dunn, Jean Holmes, and Marcella Daniel, who all went from the Canal Zone's racially segregated schools to Tennessee State University's legendary Tigerbelles women's track team.

Parchment welcomed Yancey to Panama in 1937 and must have been ecstatic that Yancey would improve the community's basketball prowess.

Cecilio Williams, a standout Black Panamanian basketball player and originator of the famed Panama Pipeline at Briar Cliff College (which sent nearly thirty Panamanian basketball players to the small college in Iowa starting in the late 1970s, leading Briar Cliff to reach national prominence in basketball), further strengthened the sport that Yancey helped develop on the isthmus. Coach Williams eventually formed some of Panama's strongest basketball teams and standout players.

Williams's tall stature gave him an advantage in the game, where height matters, but maybe more advantageous than his height was his connection to the Black sporting pipeline between Panama—more specifically the segregated institutions in the Canal Zone—and HBCUs in the United States. In the early 1950s, Williams left Panama on a scholarship to attend Savannah State College (now Savannah State University), an HBCU in Georgia, where he competed on the university's basketball team. Following his time at Savannah State, Williams returned to Panama and became a mathematics teacher within the Canal Zone's segregated school system. He continued to strengthen the pipeline of majority-Black youth going to the United States and became the central piece for the Panama Pipeline that emerged at Briar Cliff University in Iowa. Williams established Operación Tamaño (Operation Height), a basketball program in Panama City and Colón City, aimed at supporting positive youth development. Williams also intentionally sought out tall players who could potentially become great basketball players and be sent to the United States. In total, twenty-eight Panamanian basketball players, the vast majority of them Black, went on to compete at Briar Cliff during the 1970s and 1980s, leading the tiny school to eleven trips to the championship game under Coach Ray Nacke's direction (Briar Cliff University 2023). By the 1980s the NBA had drafted four Black Panamanian youth that Coach Williams had sent to Briar Cliff.

From Williams's success with the Panama Pipeline in the 1970s and 1980s to Las Panteras' 2020 evening victory in the park on Via Argentina, conditions have changed drastically in Panama. The country's sovereignty is no longer dictated by the former US Panama Canal Zone or by a US-controlled Panama Canal. The Panama Canal Treaty, signed in 1977, ended the Canal Zone as of 1979 and solidified the return of the canal itself to the Panamanians on December 31, 1999.

By the time Tito was born in 2000, the Canal Zone and the American-occupied Panama Canal existed only in the memories of his elders, in school textbooks, and in some of the lasting infrastructure in the *areas*

FIGURE 1.3. Professor Cecilio Williams, yearbook photo from Paraiso High School in the US Panama Canal Zone, 1970. Williams, hailing from Colón, was known for founding Operación Tamaño in Panama. Biblioteca Nacional de Panamá.



revertidas (reverted areas) within the former US neocolony, such as Gimnasio Kiwanis (Kiwanis Gym), where we first met. The US military once called it Reeder's Gym back when it was situated within Fort Clayton. Now the gym is part of Ciudad del Saber (City of Knowledge), the renovated US military base, which is a business park and technology hub hosting some of the region's largest international organizations, such as the United Nations. Albrook National Transportation Terminal, where Tito and his teammates rushed to catch their buses following the Via Argentina victory, was once Albrook Air Force Station. Now it was not just a transportation terminal but also a domestic airport and the second-largest shopping mall in the Americas. This is Tito's new Panama.

Tito and his teammates recognize their ancestors' journeys primarily from the British- and French-controlled Caribbean, but they see and understand themselves as *panameños* (Panamanians). Historically, becoming *panameño* was a long process that called for a collective amnesia that would absolve the Panamanian nation of the hurtful and discriminatory practices that targeted Afro-Caribbean people in its recent past (Corinealdi 2022), which included an emphasis on speaking Spanish and not their ancestors' languages. As previously noted, the young Black athletes' on-court vocabulary is peppered with English words, but they speak Spanish, a direct result of the process of *ser panameño* (being/to be Panamanian). The collective amnesia involved in becoming or being Panamanian also included attempts at destroying the athletic pipelines that tied Black Panamanians to US colleges and universities on athletic scholarships.

One of the most significant blows to these pipelines was the transfer of the Canal Zone's segregated schools for Black people to the Panamanian government's control in 1956 and their ultimate closure by the United States in 1978. For decades, these Black-centered schools had created, nurtured, and facilitated opportunities for Black youth to try their luck at US colleges and universities, particularly HBCUs. Once the United States in conjunction with Panama phased out (that is, closed) the former colored schools turned Latin American schools in the Canal Zone, many Black Panamanian stronghold educators like Coach Williams were denied opportunities to continue teaching in their same capacity in the newly integrated Canal Zone schools. As the US government reported in 1977, "There have been, however, strong objections raised by U.S. citizens against having their children taught by non-U.S. citizen teachers. Thus, placement of the teachers from the Latin American schools as those schools are phased out, is very sensitive and requires special care and attention" (US House of Representatives 1977, 105). Similarly, like elsewhere throughout the US South, many Black Panamanian educators, and coaches, were dismissed, demoted, or forcefully encouraged to retire. Consequently, the sporting networks and pipelines connecting Black Panamanians to HBCUs and Black sporting congregations in the United States began to disappear.

Tito and his teammates' style of play and their jargon have been influenced by the diasporic flows that nurtured basketball in Black communities across the diaspora. However, we cannot overlook that the Black art of basketball is deeply connected to the AIC. Athletic technology, ideas, and apparel, among other things, can now travel with ease, but Black people and their bodies, depending on their nationalities, are not afforded the

same privilege. These Black bodies are bound by their nations' borders and geopolitical relationships with other countries. Heidy Sarabia (2015) asserts that passports and visas issued in the Global North award different rights and privileges from those granted in the Global South. American nationality and citizenship mean mobility for many Black athletes, whereas their peers in the Global South find it more difficult to become spatially mobile across different nations due to discriminatory visa processing practices.

Basketball Trafficking does not stop at critiquing the AIC's exploitative use of Black youth labor within the United States. I argue that the movement of Black basketball culture around the globe without the free movement of Black migrants pushes us to consider how the AIC is also a nonstate actor and enforcer of race- and class-based US immigration policies. Tito's individual story as a young Black Panamanian male who believes he must make it to the United States to achieve class mobility and basketball success is like the stories of many others. Tito and others like him must navigate the combined efforts of the AIC, the US immigration system, and local anti-Blackness to exploit their labor until it becomes disposable and they are deported back to their countries of origin. *Basketball trafficking*, as defined in this multisited, person-centered ethnography, proves that citizenship matters within the unequal dynamic of sports migration and has material consequences in the lives of some of the youngest members of the African diaspora. Tito's experiences provide a tool of comparison to understand the subjugated colonial position that Black people share around the globe regardless of whether they are in the Global North or the Global South (Coleman-King 2014), or moving between them.

Chapter Overview

I have divided the book into seven chapters tracking Tito's journey from Panama to the United States. Chapter 1 introduces the concept of basketball trafficking by looking at the regulations behind the F-1 student visa. The chapter opens with a narrative of the 2017 Centrobasket tournament in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, with Tito securing Panama's third-place victory. I depart from Tito's story to analyze the trajectory of many aspiring Black male Central American basketball players like him, highlighting how language, race, class, and nationality are determining factors in their ability to pursue international athletic migration to the United States. Speaking English, for instance, is a requirement for participating in US intercollegiate basketball and securing an F-1 student visa. For

non-English-speaking youth like Tito, even with their immense athletic talent, the absence of English proficiency can be a barrier to entry to the United States. These English language requirements push non-English-speaking students to enter the United States at an earlier age, rendering them more vulnerable and at risk for exploitation and trafficking. As there is less regulation and virtually no oversight at the high school level, the power dynamic of coach and student can further complicate how these youngsters fare. This chapter explains why an earlier departure through interscholastic athletic migration, usually in early high school, at about fifteen to sixteen years old, provides an opportunity to overcome the strict language requirements of US colleges, universities, and intercollegiate athletic governing bodies, such as the NCAA.

Chapter 2 is entitled after the Panamanian pejorative *chombo*, which historically means a Black English speaker of West Indian descent. Tito is a Black boy from Colón City, a historic West Indian city, and the chapter seeks to connect the history of surveillance, policing, and exploitation of Black West Indians in Panama to the present by looking at Tito's visa adjudication journey. The chapter's opening scene begins with consular officers at the US embassy in Panama City denying Tito an F-1 student visa based on a "lack of English proficiency" despite the fact that Tito had won a hard-earned US basketball scholarship. I center my analysis on how the English language has a racialized character within the Panamanian context, and this often becomes one of the many challenges that young Black men encounter when applying for educational visas to the United States. The Panamanian government and elites historically viewed English- and French-speaking West Indians and their descendants as an unassimilable, anti-Hispanic criminal population, concentrated in certain neighborhoods, and took steps to diminish the use of English. Today, I argue, these dynamics play themselves out in the migratory process, and this is not just because of the US immigration system's anti-Blackness. Also at play is the local anti-Blackness in Panamanian society, informed by these histories and displayed by consular officers whose job is to make interpretations about which "aliens" to deny entrance to the United States.

Once Tito finally secures his US F-1 student visa, chapter 3 follows him to Tech Prep, a private American high school in La Frontera, Texas. Tito spends three months at Tech Prep before Coach Barrigon, the coach who saw him play at Centrobasket and recruited him to the US high school, revokes his scholarship and terminates his lawful right to remain in the United States. This chapter examines the experiences of not just Tito but

also his mostly Black teammates/housemates from Costa Rica and Panama. They are often called *los becados* (the scholarship players) by coaches, school administrators, and other students. Central to this chapter is examining the anti-Black discourse present within Latinidad at Tito's majority-mestizo (gender-neutral term) private American high school, which I argue contributes to the racialized and classed singling out of Tito and his other Black teammates as *becados*. I demonstrate that stereotypes applied to Tito and his Black teammates, including racialized nicknames that evoke tropes about Black athletic superiority, are pervasive within Latinx communities. I further argue that these racialized nicknames and other racist ideology that marks Tito's time at Tech are masked by Latin American *mestizaje*, which silences the racialized and anti-Black logics commonly employed in Latin America and its diaspora in the United States and elsewhere. I identify how anti-Black discourse around "helping" the *becados* was actually employed by school officials to exploit the student-athletes' labor and deny them promised opportunities, such as access to an English-language education and safe living conditions. In news articles and school fundraising opportunities, Tech made it seem as if it were "saving" *los becados* from their impoverished backgrounds, and any condition they found themselves in in the United States was an upgrade to their lives at home. According to this logic, Tito and his teammates should be grateful for being in the United States and should not have any gripes. Looking at the United States, Panama, and Costa Rica, this chapter demonstrates that the *desire* for Black athletic labor is fluid beyond national borders but that these young Black *men* of specific nationalities are not, and they face material and symbolic acts of anti-Black discrimination.

Chapter 4 more closely follows different types of relationships that affect Tito's life, including the hierarchical coach-player relationship with Coach Barrigon, which limits Tito's ability to protect and advocate for himself. Positive nonathletic relationships thus become essential to Tito's survival in La Frontera. He unexpectedly develops a relationship of support with Aunt Sonia, a Panamanian immigrant woman living in La Frontera who was a childhood friend of his mother and provided him a much-needed respite from the coach and sport that so negatively affected his well-being in the States. Their relationship is central to the chapter because Aunt Sonia helps Tito forge opportunities to escape abuse by revealing Tito's true living conditions, exposing his relationship with Coach Barrigon, and ultimately participating in the ploy to safely remove him from Tech. Last, the chapter explores Tito's more abstract relationship to the US immigration system as

a Black noncitizen teenager and F-1 student visa holder. This is Tito's most significant relationship during his life in the United States, but it is also the one he has the least control over. At its core the chapter demonstrates that athletic governing bodies effectively render athletic eligibility an extension of lawful immigration status in the United States, and this leads to the surveillance and punishment of F-1 student visa holders like Tito. These punitive measures manifest in different athletic governance agencies at various levels and with conflicting international student-athlete recruitment regulations.

Chapter 5 extends from the previous chapter's focus on relationships to explore how my own father's athletic migration from Panama to the United States is part of a larger historical Black West Indian Panamanian sport migration. Departing from this history, the chapter continues to make sense of Tito's arrival in Austin, Texas, following his removal by Coach Barrigon from Tech Prep. Tito subsequently enrolls in Turner High School, a public school protected by *Plyler v. Doe* (1982), a historic ruling that allowed young people to enroll in a US public school without revealing their immigration status. However, as explored through other mediated basketball trafficking cases in the chapter, the ruling also set a precedent of enabling coaches and US public school officials to evade and cheat immigration rules by using the *Plyler v. Doe* protections to get international basketball players into public schools. This chapter reveals the interconnectedness of the AIC and US federal policies by highlighting the complicity of the athletic governing bodies in different states, the NCAA, and the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency. These institutions work in tandem to surveil, police, punish, and forcibly remove Black male athletes once they are no longer useful to the system, and this reality cannot be divorced from the disproportionately racialized and gendered nature of the US deportation machine.

Chapter 6 addresses the (il)legibility of noncitizen Black male athletes to be considered victims of human trafficking in the United States. I address Tito's basketball trafficking victimhood and the material consequences of being read as illegible to pursue and obtain immigration relief in the United States. The stories in this chapter emerged in the fall of 2018 when Tito was in his second academic year at Turner High School in Austin following his removal from Tech Prep. On the verge of turning eighteen, Tito navigated illegality and the fear of deportation as he transitioned into adulthood, all while trying to achieve his US hoop dreams. Ultimately, Tito returned to Panama in 2019 to readjudicate a new visa in preparation for enrolling in a junior college in Texas, where he had been granted a full scholarship. However, he was

interrogated for two hours by US consular staff and denied a new visa. He decided to remain in Panama and forfeit the scholarship.

The book's conclusion provides an update on Tito's life after his second visa denial, when he decided to remain in Panama. I explain how Tito and his family navigated his return to life in Panama and his continued desire to leave for basketball opportunities. Tito ultimately decides not to return to the United States because of his adverse experiences. Instead, he decides to go to Mexico and participate in the growing university basketball scene near the US-Mexico border. This chapter poses questions about how the growing Mexican basketball scene mirrors the dynamics of US intercollegiate basketball, particularly with the emphasized recruitment of Black Central American players. I leave these questions as departure points for further research to interrogate the role of race and the sports industrial complex in Latin America. I also provide recommendations on identifying and mitigating instances when basketball trafficking is occurring.

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