

The Caribbean *Carretera*: Race, Space and Social Liminality in Costa Rica

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A single highway connects the Caribbean province of Limón to mainstream society in the highlands of Costa Rica. This paper explores the ways in which that highway affects the status hierarchy of mainstream society in Costa Rica, and how the construction of whiteness as an unexamined racial qualifier for total social incorporation constrains the perception of blacks as social liminars and blackness as a state of *communitas*. The argument elaborates the work of Victor Turner on ritual liminality to suggest the structural ambiguity of Afro-Latin Americans in the context of Costa Rica.

Keywords: Race, Space, Liminality, Costa Rica

Introduction

In the mid-1980s, the Costa Rican government completed the first major roadway, or *carretera*, connecting the highlands to the Caribbean coast. Though a road connecting the key economic port of Limón to the highland capital city of San José seemed always on the drawing board, it was not until the 1970s that construction began in earnest. A decade later, after scrapping the project and starting from scratch, the *carretera* offered the first and only alternative to the slow, narrow-gauge railroad that had for decades stretched 90 miles into a full day's journey. The *carretera* allowed the free flow of traffic between the highland capital and the Caribbean port, and in so doing, began the process of a long threatened 'black invasion'.

The perceived invasion of blackness from the Caribbean coast is part of a physio-spatial reification of race in white Costa Rican society that associates blackness and danger with certain portions of the national landscape. This conceptual association between race and space has been documented throughout the Caribbean littoral of Central America and parts of South America. Cathy McIlwaine points out that these regions all represent 'enclave economies based on the export of primary products, and all reflect an ethnic diversity not present in the rest of the national territory' (1997: 40). The result, confirmed by Helms

(1977) and Gordon (1998) in Nicaragua, Rahier in Ecuador (1998), and Wade (1993) in Colombia, is 'a "regionalisation" of race which reflects a stereotyped image of black backwardness and mestizo economic dynamism' (McIlwaine, 1997: 40). Both Wade (1993) and Rahier (1998) focus specifically on the peculiar phenomenon of the spatial reification of race, which Rahier refers to as the racial/spatial order.

The research presented here brings a new perspective to the racial/spatial order of post-colonial Afro-Latin America, inspired primarily by the peculiarity of Costa Rica's nationalist self-image, but applicable to the cultural politics of race throughout Latin America. Long associating themselves with Anglo-European descent, Costa Ricans have constructed what Godmundson (1986) calls a white myth of racial purity. Part of the legacy of this myth is a nationalist dichotomy between Costa Rica and the rest of Central America, which in popular nationalist opinion is undesirably *mestizo*, or of mixed ancestry. Afro-Costa Ricans, who were granted citizenship after 1948, remain caught in the excluded middle of this nationalist dichotomy.

This paper argues that, more than simply an enclave community, Afro-Costa Ricans are caught 'betwixt and between' (Turner, 1974: 232) the statuses of complete outsiders and fully-incorporated members of Costa Rican society. This approach is predicated on the notion that blackness as a category of identification in Costa Rica, as in other Latin American contexts, is at least partially constructed and constrained by the dominant society of white Costa Ricans. According to Whitten and Torres (1998), among others (Jackson, 1988; Rahier, 1999), blackness is often constructed as an internal strategy of resistance among Afro-Latin Americans, overtly politicised in solidarity movements that often extend beyond local national borders. This view of black self-identification in Latin America is usually presented as a form of resistance to the overarching structure of power where whites control the symbolic capital from which all must draw in their construction of identity. As Purcell points out, '[Blacks] have little alternative but to find their place within the existing structure' (1993: 88). As such, this paper focuses on how blackness is constructed by the dominant society of white Costa Ricans, and how Afro-Costa Ricans negotiate that top-down construction of their social status as both achieved and ascribed.

The result is a regionalisation of race where a single highway connects two distinct and oppositional regional configurations. At the white terminus, the highlands, the steadfast and relatively unexamined racial qualifier in the nationalist self-image forces Afro-Costa Ricans into a perpetual process of social initiation where blacks and blackness take on the symbolic trappings of danger and pollution. At the black point of origin, Limón, the categories are reversed, such that white migrants to Limón are placed in a similar position of liminality with all the trappings of danger and pollution, but without the racial qualifier that precludes total social incorporation. The *carretera* that connects Limón to the wider Costa Rican context serves as a two-way street for the exclusion and incorporation of certain sections of society, and provides unique insight into the socialisation of race and the racialisation of space.

The black city

Puerto Limón is a port city of approximately 60,000. The principal port of the country since shortly after its founding at the turn of the twentieth century, Limón has suffered all of the neglect a key economic site should not have to endure. Many would argue this derives directly from its unique historical development as an Afro-Caribbean enclave established by the hiring practices of the United Fruit Company (UFC) (Bourgeois, 1989; Purcell, 1993).

The UFC began its transnational economic conquest of Central and South America in Costa Rica when Minor C. Keith was contracted to build a railroad between the coffee plantations of the highlands and the natural bay at Limón on the Caribbean coast. The reputation in the Atlantic zone for rampant disease and oppressive heat left few willing labourers in the area, forcing Keith to look to the Caribbean for his work force. The result was the almost overnight construction of a bustling port city of over 20,000 Afro-Caribbean labourers.

When Keith turned to planting bananas along the newly laid tracks, the need for Caribbean labour increased exponentially. The UFC scoured the islands for new labour, relying on the Anglophone Caribbean to provide English-speaking workers well versed in plantation life. As most arrived from Jamaica, with a handful from Barbados, St. Kitts, and other islands in the Caribbean Commonwealth, their affiliation with the British government lent a certain amount of perceived superiority over the few Costa Rican labourers. The UFC played on this overt allegiance to Great Britain, and often recruited labourers from church pulpits 'explaining to prospective workers that if they went to work for the United Fruit Company they would be serving Her Majesty's cause' (Purcell, 1993: 29).

This influx of Afro-Caribbeans overwhelmed the popular image of Costa Rica as an Anglo-European stronghold among the largely *mestizo* populations of other Central American countries. Quotes like those from newspapers in the 1930s vividly express the perceptions of Limón held by Costa Rican outsiders: 'The shadow which is today confined to the Atlantic zone will move toward other sections of the republic ... How can we Costa Ricans, who live on this soil permanently ... be indifferent to the black invasion ... This is a problem in which sentimentalism has no part for it is of biological or rather eugenic character' (quoted in Jones, 1935: 41).

The response was a series of legislative measures taken as early as the mid-nineteenth century which sought to 'prohibit the colonisation of national territory by the African and Chinese races' and to 'avoid the immigration of people who by their race ... would bring to the nation physiological degeneration and elements propitious to the development of idleness and vice' (Duncan and Powell, 1988: 67, 69). As one historian pointed out at the time, 'there is a well defined fear that immigration will grow in numbers and that the immigrants will spread from the area in which they now chiefly live' (Jones, 1935: 41). In Costa Rica, these attitudes inspired Article 5, Paragraph 3 of Costa Rican law which prohibited 'people of colour' from moving out of

Limón province (Duncan and Melendez, 1972). Though the law was aimed at blacks who constituted the majority of 'people of colour', the restrictions applied to all those outside the parameters of Costa Rica's national self-image as white and European.

The growing resistance of the Costa Rican government to foreign labourers effectively quarantined the Afro-Caribbean population to the Atlantic zone. In 1927, 94.1 per cent of all Afro-Caribbeans in Costa Rica lived in Limón province. Puerto Limón alone boasted an estimated population of 21,259 Afro-Caribbean inhabitants out of a total population of 28,739 (Jones, 1935). For many in Costa Rica, neither the UFC nor the government restricted the Afro-Caribbean population of Limón enough. The UFC came under increasing criticism for hiring foreign labourers and directing much of the profits from Costa Rica's largest export to British and US interests. When a devastating plant fungus known as *Sigatoka* hit the banana plantations in the late 1930s, the company decided to move out of the Atlantic zone (Creedman, 1991). The company transplanted the entire operation to the Pacific coast. The new contract between the UFC and the Costa Rican government included the clause: 'The preference of all labour shall be given to Costa Ricans on the farms, and it is agreed that no coloured labour shall be employed in banana farming in the Pacific Coast' (Lefever, 1992: 212).

Costa Rica witnessed another radical shift in 1948 with the last civil war in its history. Jose 'Pepe' Figueres took control of government and initiated sweeping changes in the national ideology. Though this watershed event confirmed once and for all the socio-political dominance of Costa Rican whites in all parts of the nation, the new government took special pains to incorporate Limón and redress at least some of the overtly racist practices of the past. Figueres extended citizenship to all remaining Afro-Caribbeans, many of whom fought for him in the short revolution (Royal and Perry, 1996; Olien, 1977). In the spirit of his social democratic program, Figueres began a national campaign emphasising Costa Rica's colonial egalitarianism and de-emphasised any racial divisions in the population. For Figueres, social mobility was a class issue, and regardless of racial or ethnic considerations, one could achieve higher status through education and perseverance. The new government expanded the national education system, and Spanish became the language of instruction for most of the newly Afro-Costa Rican children of the 1950s. Figueres also nationalised various industries, including the port in Limón, and extended a governmental bureaucracy throughout the country.

By the time of my fieldwork from 1997 to 1998, it was evident that this new era of social democracy provided a convenient opportunity to side-step the issue of racism in Costa Rica. By emphasising an ideology of total social incorporation, Figueres set in place a system that precluded any explanation of disadvantage or exclusion based on race. As an Anglo-North American, I was often perceived as 'sympathetic' to a white Costa Rican perspective on the issue of race and social, political and economic opportunity. In conversations with white Costa Ricans, an emphasis on equality was often asserted in concert with typically racist explanations for disadvantage among Afro-Costa Ricans. 'Why Limón?' was the

response from many Costa Rican whites in the capital city of San José when informed that I lived in Limón. Many elaborated on the violent crime, drugs, and poverty that ‘lazy blacks’ perpetuate, and in the same breath assured me, ‘there is no racism in Costa Rica’. The words of one white Costa Rican in Limón encapsulates well the paradox: ‘Racism does not exist in Costa Rica. Racism does not exist. But there are a few cases. The blacks are almost all racist. The blacks are racist’ (trans.).¹ The quote belies the fact that an insidiously subtle racism does exist within the white majority of the national socio-political environment.

The political subversion of overt racial politics in the name of social democracy is certainly not unique to Costa Rica. In fact, Costa Ricans came rather late to this particularly effective strategy for silencing minorities which other Latin American nations have practised for generations. Though articulated in various different ways, the often subtle subordination of non-white minorities to a status structure that is premised on the superiority of the white majority continues to plague movements for self-identification among Afro-Latin Americans and indigenous groups throughout Latin America (see Wade, 1997; Whitten and Torres, 1998). The fact that Costa Rica was able to maintain its view of racial purity into the twentieth century meant only that the implementation of this familiar strategy of subordination would be postponed until the highlands were confronted by the black invasion from Limón. As such, the racist contradictions encountered in my forays into the highlands of Costa Rica presented above could just as easily be heard in Bogota, Quito or Sao Palo, with the possible exception that elsewhere the diatribes are more well rehearsed.

Puerto Limón is today a predominantly white city with approximately 50 percent white Costa Ricans, 40 percent Afro-Costa Ricans, and the rest split between immigrant Chinese and white, ex-patriot North Americans. This seems not to have exerted any influence on the persistent perception of Puerto Limón as predominantly Afro-Costa Rican. One Afro-Costa Rican minister from Limón comments that although he is Nicaraguan by birth, immigration officers in the capital city never bother to check his papers: ‘The assumption is, if you’re black, you’re from Limón’. He also complains that even school textbooks describe Limón as predominantly black. One white Limonense artist explains: ‘When the people of the Central Valley speak of Limón they say *los negros* ... So when I paint a scene, to remember that it is Limón I paint a black. Maybe fishing, making something from coconut, playing ... If you paint a black person, people see it and say, “Limón!”’ (trans.). The constant theme in each response is the impression that Limón is still a black province.

This persistent conceptual association between Limón and its Afro-Costa Rican population creates an equally persistent ideology of blackness among

1 Throughout this article, all quotes not followed by a parenthetical reference are the words of local informants based mostly on taped interviews. Though some of the interviews, as well as some of the secondary sources, were in Spanish, I have taken the liberty of translating all quotes to English. All quotes originally in Spanish are marked by the notation ‘(trans.)’

Limonenses. Though based in part on false impressions and latent racism, Limonenses legitimate the concept of a 'black province' as the ideological basis of a shared identity. This phenomenon is evident in the responses of Afro-Costa Ricans, as well as those of other ethnic groups who remain loyal to Limón. Similar to the myth of racial purity that posits whiteness as the qualifying marker of inclusion in the highlands, blackness is the central organising principle for regional identification in Limón. A crucial distinction between the two, however, to be explored more fully below, is that while whiteness represents a reification of perceived racial homogeneity, blackness represents an embodiment of cultural practices that does not necessarily include a specific phenotype designation. Moreover, both are defined by the socially and politically dominant white Costa Rican highland society which positions whiteness as the defining standard against the catch-all category of blackness. Inevitably this constrains the contexts in which Afro-Costa Ricans can effectively act as agents of their own identification in the highlands and, to a lesser extent, in Limón. As Henriette Moore explains, the dominant interpretations of the cultural topography 'acquire a particular power through their constant repetition, and, as a result, tend to provide the framework within which alternative interpretations are made' (Moore 1986: 187). Even now, as Afro-Costa Ricans recede into the physical minority among Limonenses, Puerto Limón is still the 'black city' in the 'black province'.

The black invasion at the white terminus

In the early part of the twentieth century, the regionalisation of race in Costa Rica amounted to a conceptual spatial containment of blackness in Limón. For decades this was easily maintained through both *de jure* and *de facto* restriction of blacks to move about the country. Geographically, the main barrier between Limón and the rest of Costa Rica has always been the great chain of volcanoes that run the length of country. Though most are dormant, some still rumble with activity, standing as sentinels along the provincial border. More than a mere physical boundary, though certainly they were that until recently, the volcanic chain was a cultural boundary, holding back the 'black invasion' which threatened to dilute the highland perception of racial purity.

Following the great social and political changes of the 1948 civil war, even the volcanoes could not stop Afro-Costa Ricans from seeking education and employment in San José. But the most significant change in the flow of bodies across the cultural border was the construction of the *carretera* that connected Limón to the highlands.

With the highway came a regular bus service with a depot in the centre of San José. Though most inter-city bus routes pass through the main terminal, the Limón stop was located just across the street from the Limón rail station which had to cease operation after the earthquake of 1991 destroyed much of the track. Isolated in one corner of the city centre, the Limón stop quickly became known as a dangerous place to be, especially at night. Upon my arrival, 'helpful' Costa

Ricans warned me of the area, and even the guidebooks advised against spending too much time near the Limón stop. The fact that the Limón bus depot is located two blocks from the Public Library and two of the oldest and most respected barrios in the city seem not to have exerted any positive influence on the perception of danger associated with the area.

This perception of danger associated with the Limón bus stop in San José is consistent with the image of racial pollution warned of earlier in the century when Afro-Caribbeans first arrived on the Atlantic coast. For highland society, the highway enables not only the free flow of commerce between the capital and the nation's most important port city, but also the free flow of embodied contaminate from the 'black' province.

One particularly salient example of this conceptual association between blackness and pollution comes from a white Costa Rican woman whose father moved the family to Limón while working on the nationalisation of education in the city and has since moved back to the highlands. She describes life in the port city when *Parque Vargas*, the main city park, was considered the cleanest and most beautiful park in Costa Rica. Her father, who now lives in the highlands as well, also professes a strong emotional attachment to Limón, going so far as to say his favourite part of Limón was '*los negros*'. Both, however, decry the condition of the city today, using words like 'dirty', 'ugly' and 'dangerous'. It wasn't until they sought an explanation for the deterioration of Puerto Limón that they resorted to the typical association between Afro-Costa Ricans and pollution: 'When the blacks lived on the outskirts, the centre was clean and the outskirts were ugly, but now the blacks have moved to the centre and it has become dirty and ugly' (trans.). In the end, the woman shrugged her shoulders and, as if it explained everything, offered, 'It is now in the hands of the blacks' (trans.).

One potential explanation for this racist association between blackness, pollution and danger lies in the overall perception of Limonenses as cultural initiates with all the symbolic capital of ritual liminars, rather than simply outsiders or even marginals. Victor Turner's now classic elaboration of van Gennep's work on rites of passage (see Turner 1967; van Gennep 1960), which focuses specifically on the religious implications of such a process, may be productively applied as a descriptive model to a similar socio-political process at work in Costa Rica.

Unlike newly arrived immigrants, Afro-Costa Ricans are third and fourth generation inhabitants perceived as citizens in the social democratic plan of total incorporation. In this sense, they are not perceived as being permanently 'set outside the structural arrangements of [the] given social system' (Turner 1974: 233), which Turner describes as outsiderhood. They are not simply outsiders looking in on the status structure of Costa Rican society, they are members of society caught on the threshold between exclusion and incorporation.

As such, they may be perceived as marginals, who 'have no cultural assurance of a final stable resolution of their ambiguity' (Turner 1974: 233). Indeed, marginality may be an accurate description of Afro-Costa Ricans vis-à-

vis their own perception of their structural position. However, the social democratic ideology of white Costa Rican society depends upon the eventual total social incorporation of Afro-Costa Ricans and a stable resolution to their ambiguity. As in many other Latin American contexts, the conflicting cultural practices of Afro-Costa Ricans are seen as impediments to their incorporation into the nation; from their reluctance to give up private English-language education, to the proliferation of protestant churches, to their insistence on Caribbean rhythms and dance steps in national marches. This, of course, is combined with the unexamined racial qualifier for total incorporation. As Bourgois points out, 'the racism of the host society limits the rapidity of their acculturation. *Were it not for phenotypically based discrimination, Blacks would probably no longer exist as a distinct ethnic group in Costa Rica*' (Bourgois 1998: 128, emphasis added). Based on the white myth of racial purity, the dominant society continues to place phenotype in the list of required attributes, and in this regard Blacks will always be viewed as social initiates, in the same structural position as ritual liminars.

The naturalisation of Afro-Costa Ricans instigated by Figueres after the 1948 civil war is a rite of passage with no neat conclusion, forcing Afro-Costa Ricans into a position of structural ambiguity with the hope of aggregation into a higher status ever present but perpetually deferred. Like the spatial associations with initiates in various ritual processes, Limón is viewed as the untamed wilderness where those in the liminal status of a rite of passage must remain until they are made 'fully human'.

This is perhaps most clearly seen in the infantilisation of Afro-Costa Ricans in literature; a literary device not uncommon to the US and other parts of the African diaspora. Throughout the work of well-known white Costa Rican novelists Carlos Luis Fallas and Joaquín Gutiérrez, Afro-Costa Ricans are consistently referred to with the diminutive *negrito* and otherwise belittled as ignorant or childish. In Gutiérrez's novel *Puerto Limón*, a labour activist, Paraguitas, treats the main Afro-Costa Rican character, Tom, as though he were unable to grasp the complexity of his own plight. As Lorein Powell observes in her reading of the novel: 'Paraguitas, in his relationship with the black character [Tom], ... has to make him see and explain it to him as though he were castrated, a large man-child, stupid and inept' (Powell, 1988: 99, trans.). It seems castration here refers as much to a fear-driven emasculation of the sexually stereotyped black male by a white Costa Rican author as it does to the removal of Tom's most potent symbol of adulthood.

The perception of Limonenses as somehow stuck in a perpetual rite of passage not only imputes child-like qualities to black characters, it also, somewhat contradictorily, associates blackness with danger. As Mary Douglas points out, initiates in a marginal condition will be expected to behave anti-socially whether or not experience bears this out: 'to have been in the margins is to have been in contact with danger, to have been at a source of power' (Douglas, 1966: 97). This suggests that the conceptual association between Limonenses and danger is a product of the persistent perception of marginality and the refusal to

acknowledge Limonenses as fully-formed yet cultural distinct rather than merely partially formed Costa Ricans.

Peter Wade (1993), in his work on blackness and race mixture, deals with similar phenomena in Colombia. Wade takes on Taussig's (1987) treatment of magic and sorcery to explain the seemingly contradictory reactions of nonblack Colombians to black cultural practices. Much like the dynamic found in Costa Rica, blacks in Colombia are viewed as 'primitive', or somehow less culturally advanced, by nonblacks. Wade contends that this has created an image of blacks as 'possessed of some special powers . . . traditionally defined by the Catholic church as corrupt but which still (perhaps as a result) hold a certain fascination' (Wade, 1993: 23). As Afro-Costa Ricans are perceived as 'charged with power, hot, dangerous' (Douglas, 1966: 97), so too are Colombian blacks. Both 'have powers not granted their masters [elite nonblacks]', and as a result, 'the nonblack world turns to these cultures to tap their powers for certain specific purposes' (Wade, 1993: 23). Because it is collectively viewed as a source of power, black culture is sought out even as it repulses elite society.

Douglas' somewhat vague notion of danger associated with the formlessness of liminality is given more concrete basis in Wade's analysis, but neither adequately explains the dynamic at work in Costa Rica. As argued above, Afro-Costa Ricans are caught in what may be described as a perpetual state of liminality. They are more than outsiders, but less than equals. In this state, they, like ritual initiates, 'are stripped of status and authority . . . and further leveled to a homogeneous social state' (Turner, 1974: 259). As such, in the peculiar paradox of liminality, Afro-Costa Ricans are part of the social system without a place in the status hierarchy. The result is what Turner refers to as a state of *communitas*, where the typical social barriers between individuals created by the status structure are removed.

This is not to suggest that within Limón or even among Afro-Costa Ricans there are no social barriers or marks of social status. Germane to the issue of conceptual associations between blackness and danger are the perceptions of white Costa Ricans as representative of the dominant society. The *perception* of liminality is enough to create the *perception* of *communitas*, with its incumbent rejection of morality or structural authority, which leads to a perceived threat to 'fully formed' Costa Rican society. This explains Douglas' emphasis on the formlessness of liminality as the source of danger, and for Wade, clarifies the real threat a similar position in Colombian society would hold for the Catholic church. As Turner points out: 'from the perspective of incumbents in positions of command or maintenance in structure, *communitas* . . . represents a real danger' (1974: 245).

In this regard, blackness, as it is constructed by the dominant white Costa Rican society, is essentially formless. Positioned in contrast to the defining standard of whiteness, blackness takes on the infinite distance of the excluded middle between white and not-white. Nancy Jay (1990) argues a similar point in her feminist analysis of gender dichotomy which positions 'female' as an essentially formless category against the defining standard of 'male' as a

discrete and known identity. Blackness in Costa Rica remains similarly indistinct in so far as it is not-white, taking on the semiotic baggage of an oppositional category to the propriety of whiteness. Not surprisingly, in Costa Rica 'dark skin signals poverty, indolence, and lack of intelligence and sophistication, all traits perceived as downright primitive' (Purcell 1993: 104). These traits are not only primitive, they are a threat to the status structure of the dominant society. The formlessness of blackness is related to the lack of structure inherent in *communitas*, which is part of the dominant society's perception of Afro-Costa Ricans as social liminars.

If perceptions of danger find their source in the perceived threat to hierarchy presented by the *communitas* of blackness, it is perhaps not surprising that blackness, as a stereotyped image of structural immunity, also holds a certain fascination for mainstream society. Afro-Costa Rican author Quince Duncan offers an insightful image of this phenomenon during a conversation about Carnival in Limón: 'I don't know, there is like a certain admiration for the Afro-Caribbean culture. I look at the Carnival and I see all of them dressing up and trying to appear as black people. Even those that talk about blacks being lazy, you just look at them dancing'. In the context of Limón's Carnival celebration, the appropriation of blackness is only temporary, and what holds an attractive fascination for outsiders during the course of the festival, quickly reverts to detachment and even repulsion for the rest of the year.

Turner anticipates this phenomenon in his analysis of liminality and *communitas*, describing how 'occupants of positions in the middle rungs of structure on whom structural pressures to conformity are greatest ... secretly envy even while they openly reprobate the behavior of those groups and classes less normatively inhibited' (1974: 243). So the seemingly contradictory attraction to blackness by highland white Costa Ricans may be explained by envy; a desire to, at least for a time, be as normatively uninhibited as Limonenses are perceived to be. The great irony of that dynamic is that many Limonenses keep their distance from the city centre during Carnival because of the danger that is perceived to travel with thousands of highland whites who come to Limón to 'go native' and lose their inhibitions.

The appropriation of Carnival by Costa Rican whites is discussed in detail elsewhere (Sharman 1998), but a similar appropriation also occurs in smaller, more subtle transactions across the cultural boundaries. Rap and reggae have steadily increased in popularity outside Limón, and cities like Puntarenas and San José have organised their own Carnivals which include Limonense street bands known as *comparsas*.

To illustrate one striking example of the attraction and repulsion of blackness for white Costa Ricans, I accompanied one of the more famous *comparsas* to a performance in the predominantly white, highland city of Cartago. As the band spilled out of the bus that had carried us over the volcanoes from Limón along the Caribbean *carretera*, their garishly coloured costumes and poly-rhythmic sound could not have clashed more with the staid military cadence of the military band performing before them.

This clash of style had a noticeable affect on the spectators lining the streets. On the one hand there was a palpable shock that seemed to repel the crowd. I had the overwhelming impression of people at a zoo staring at some strange exotic animal. Even so, at some points the crowd would pull in so close that the band could not move forward, and their performance was reduced to a kind of staged concert. It was this mix of distance and reluctant intrigue that characterised the highland reaction to the *Brasileros*, and might well describe their attitude in general toward Limón.

White migrants at the black point of origin

‘The highway didn’t just carry black people out’, one Afro-Costa Rican woman said to me, ‘It carried all the white people in’. She, like other Afro-Costa Ricans, offer constant reminders that the *carretera* that connects Limón to the highlands runs both ways and is to blame for the modern social problems of Puerto Limón. ‘The good white people stayed in San José because they had homes and jobs, but all the rest came down here and brought with them crime and all that’. As the highway represents the locus of cultural pollution in San José, it also represents the downfall of Puerto Limón to many Afro-Costa Ricans. Though the quote above links undesirable ‘white people’ with ‘crime and all that’, there is also a tacit recognition that the highway represents the final blow to any real Afro-Costa Rican authority in the Limón region.

One prominent black Limonense musician and businessman offers the following narrative on the negative impact of whites from the highlands:

You see the nice straight streets, wide like that. You don’t see nothing like that anywhere else in Costa Rica. That’s because people from the States knew how to build a city. And the black people, they is working hard to make it nice. The Spanish [white Costa Ricans], they don’t know how to build a city, with their narrow little streets. They don’t plan ahead. Now Limón used to be something, because the American companies and black people, they keep it nice. People used to think the central market was our city park it was so clean. There was no crime, no bars on the windows. People could just leave their doors open all the time. But then the government built the highway, the whites come in, and they f—ked it all up.

His comments demonstrate a close relationship between nationalism, race and the urban landscape, especially where those intersect with power and a sense of local control over cultural capital. The traditional governance over the city and the cultural development of the province enjoyed by Afro-Costa Ricans has been directly challenged by white Costa Rican influence since the civil war. The construction of the highway made it that much easier to export Afro-Costa Ricans and any wealth that might come through the port and import white Costa Ricans who, in the eyes of Afro-Costa Ricans, never cared much for the province or the city.

The frustration displayed in the quotes above also suggests a construction of whiteness that operates as a mirror image to that of blackness in the highlands. From the black point of origin, the same language employed elsewhere across the national landscape to refer to blacks as cultural initiates appears to operate in reverse. Here whites are associated with 'crime and all that', the disorder of white government threatens black authority, and even city planning has suffered under the unpredictability and short-sightedness of white 'immigrants' to the black province.

This structural reversal is more intelligible in light of Limón's development as an Afro-Caribbean enclave long before Costa Rican whites laid claim to the port. Limón is somewhat unique for its history of black leadership and de facto political authority in a Latin American context. North American plantation management actively recruited and promoted English-speaking, Protestant Caribbean blacks over Costa Rican labourers, creating an environment of black superiority over Costa Rican whites that would persist for generations.

The legacy of that inverted hierarchy, which quickly deteriorated as a political reality after the civil war, continues to influence the Afro-Costa Rican perception of Limonense authority and cultural legitimacy. As such, Limonenses share the national perception of Limón as a black province, but in Limón, blackness is the key to total social incorporation.

Still, the inversion of categories at either end of the *carretera* is incomplete. In the highlands, white Costa Ricans, as the dominant members of a status hierarchy, must organise everyone in terms of social status, whether achieved, as in certain cultural practices, or ascribed, as in certain racial categories. But this status hierarchy is built upon a white myth of racial purity that precludes the eventual aggregation of Afro-Costa Ricans into Costa Rican society and perpetuates their position as social liminars. This leaves them in a 'betwixt and between' state where the operative categories of Costa Rican society are suspended. Blackness, then, becomes the catch-all category of structural ambiguity from the perspective of white Costa Ricans. As a result, blackness is constructed as a set of cultural practices that conform to an image of *communitas* created in part by the perceptions of mainstream society. The very quality of blackness that associates it with danger and pollution for mainstream society, its structure-less conformity to *communitas* as a normative status, is what precludes its organisation into a status hierarchy. As such, blackness in Limón is not based on the ascribed status of a racial category, as whiteness is defined in the highlands. Blackness, which is partially a product of white Costa Rican physio-spatial reification, is constructed as essentially formless, and the status hierarchy which hinges on race as the unexamined qualifier for total social incorporation in the highlands does not apply in 'the untamed wilderness' of Limón.

So while white migrants to Limón are placed in a similarly (non)structural position as blacks outside Limón, and as such share a similar connotation as dangerous and polluting, their position is not constrained by their skin tone. In this context, an appropriation of blackness does not require phenotypical assimilation or an inversion of the infamous process of *blanqueamiento* or

‘whitening’, but rather a commitment to black *comunitas* as a normative status through certain cultural practices.

Trevor Purcell (1993) highlights this process in his work on Puerto Limón and the surrounding province. Purcell describes a Limonese commitment to solidarity that often makes it difficult for newcomers, especially white Costa Ricans, to be accepted without undergoing a levelling process. According to Purcell, ‘even individuals not normally on the best of terms with community members would sometimes join in criticisms of the outsider’ (1993: 73). However, because race or colour is not the defining criteria for acceptance, white Costa Rican newcomers can eventually gain acceptance through conformity to certain cultural practices that remove markers of status hierarchy. This process may best be described as conformity to a normative *comunitas*. To that end, Purcell notes that even white Costa Ricans who conform to these practices are ‘likely to secure acceptance in a surprisingly short span of time’ (1993: 73).

The crucial caveat of race as the social barrier in the highlands spoils the mirror image at the *carrretera*’s black point of origin. In Limón, skin tone does not preclude an embodiment of blackness that enables total social incorporation. One Afro-Costa Rican describing her ambivalence about racism in Costa Rica offers an intriguing illustration:

My mother, she had straight hair and light eyes. She was white. Okay, she was black, but she was white, you know? And my father was [she puts a hand to her lips and speaks from the side of her mouth as if in mock embarrassment] *black*. They do him a favour in that picture [she points to a portrait of her mother and father, roughly the same light skin tone] because he was black. And we get this [dark skin] from him, you know? But we never have no problem.

The construction of blackness, at least for this woman, goes much deeper than skin tone. The ‘whiteness’ of her mother’s body does not deny her embodiment of blackness, ‘okay, she was black’, but there was also an evaluative judgement on the ‘*black-ness*’ of her father. Here, a white body seems not always to preclude an embodiment of blackness, even if the opposite remains impossible.

As Purcell and the above quote indicate, unlike whiteness in the highlands, blackness in Limón is more an embodiment of cultural practice than it is a specific phenotype designation. For those who have laid down roots in Limón, regardless of their phenotype, the tension between two very different interpretations of Limón and blackness by outsiders and locals has exerted an influence on their own perceptions of blackness and the urban space of their city. In negative terms, this amounts to a destructive internalisation of racist stereotypes. In more positive terms, the result is a multi-ethnic affiliation with a more flexible and amalgamated notion of blackness that rests less on racist stereotypes than on the collective connotation of power associated with *comunitas*. Here *comunitas* is not the licentious category of disorganisation, but a more sustainable, intentional challenge to status hierarchy imposed by mainstream Costa Rican society.

This phenomenon is reflected in the comments of white Costa Ricans who by identifying as Limonenses make overt connections to blackness as a category of cultural practice. A successful white Costa Rican business owner in downtown Limón comments that ‘Limón will always be based on the black culture. When we grew up we adopted that culture. We ate the rice and beans, we were a part of that’ (trans.). A local school band director confirms this phenomenon among white Costa Rican children who move to Limón from the Central Valley. When asked why the influx of Costa Rican whites had not changed the basic Caribbean flavour of school band performance, he claimed the white youth wanted to absorb the black culture in Limón: ‘They may bring the old ways with them . . . but outside the house, in the street and in the schools, they want to adopt the Limón culture’. Perhaps most revealing is the comment by one white woman in Puerto Limón describing how she reacted to snubs from highland Costa Ricans: ‘I tell them if being Limonense means being black, then I am black, because I am proud to be Limonense!’ (trans.).

These responses demonstrate the appropriation of blackness by white Costa Rican migrants to Limón in the face of a parent nation reticent to claim even the whites in the ‘black province’. However, as white Costa Rican migrants associate themselves with the *communitas* of blackness in Limón, they become open to the same reprobation in the highlands as Afro-Costa Ricans. Along with a proactive appropriation of blackness, there is also the implicit admission that blackness is able to ‘pollute’ not only spaces but bodies, such that, in the eyes of highland white Costa Ricans, whites who self-identify as Limonense become just as dangerous and polluted as their darker-skinned neighbours, friends, and family.

Abel Pacheco, a white Costa Rican novelist whose strong feelings toward Limón are indicative of those who have embraced the pariah status of the ‘black’ province, has explored this theme in an effort to bring balance to the racist images created in the work of Fallas and Gutiérrez. As a white Costa Rican, Pacheco, like many non-blacks who self-identify as Limonenses, is defensive about Limón’s ethnic heritage especially in regard to the ‘white myth’ of their parent nation. Part of this process is a literary reconstruction of history. In ‘Sigatoka y Similares’, Pacheco offers a particularly insightful tale of Mista Waca [Mister Walker] and the plant fungus that eventually drove the UFC out of Limón:

He laughed with the conviction that man and earth are an indivisible whole, that they would never be able to separate his black earth from his black hands . . . [H]e watched the blonde-haired whites come with papers, lawyers, police, and tractors. Now there are bananas where once there was cocoa, where once there was his home. But then came the plague. And the blonde bananas were painted black. They said it was a fungus . . . Ha! Ha! Ha! (Pacheco, 1972: 40, trans.).

Pacheco not only recreates in miniature the historical transformation of Limonense cultural geography, but he also empowers the notion of blackness in the Limonense context by associating it with the dreaded *Sigatoka* plant fungus

that drove out the mighty UFC. Blackness, like the fungus that painted the 'blonde bananas' black, is implied to have the same power over the 'blonde-haired whites'.

The appropriation of blackness by whites in Limón implies a flexibility in identification achieved through an embodiment of cultural practice that can override the somatic image of the body. This allows white Costa Rican migrants to Limón to pass through the liminal period of initiation and ultimately find total social incorporation within the *communitas* of blackness. Turner makes clear in his formulation of this process that movement between statuses can be either higher or lower in the structural hierarchy of the dominant group (see Turner, 1974: 232). From the perspective of highland society, white migrants to Limón who self-identify as Limonense are seen as having descended the Caribbean *carretera* both literally and figuratively. The result are comments from white Costa Ricans like those above, 'if being Limonense means being black, then I am black' (trans.). As we have seen, a reversal of this process at the white terminus of the *carretera* remains impossible as long as whiteness remains a racial qualifier in the status hierarchy of mainstream Costa Rican society.

Conclusion

At the risk of oversimplifying a complex and contingent process, Turner's elaboration of religious rites of passage provides a useful metaphor for the socio-political process at work in Costa Rica, and may productively be applied elsewhere in Latin America. At one end of a single highway that connects Limón to the seat of social and political power in the highlands, white Costa Rican society has constructed an image of blackness that can not be categorised as outsiderhood, and whose democratic ideology of total social incorporation precludes its association with marginality. The result is a social position not unlike that of ritual liminars, whose structural ambiguity in relation to the dominant society is placated by the promise of eventual incorporation at a higher status.

But that promise is perpetually deferred by the white myth of racial purity that remains unexamined in the dominant ideology. 'There is no racism in Costa Rica', so Afro-Costa Ricans, and by degrees, all Limonenses, are to white Costa Ricans still unformed initiates in the national context of Costa Rica because of their aberrant cultural practices. However, their bodies and the space they inhabit are associated with the dangerous power of *communitas*, which in Costa Rica, is indelibly associated with blackness as both the embodiment of foreign cultural practices *and* the reification of racial difference. That construction of blackness ultimately prohibits Afro-Costa Ricans from total social incorporation into white Costa Rican society.

At the other end of the single highway, Limonenses must negotiate an image of blackness as polluting and dangerous, but not consciously racialised. They must create a sense of place out of their 'polluted' patch of space in the national

landscape, thus thwarting the process of acculturation that would allegedly move the wider Costa Rican society to redress the social and political exclusion of Limón and Limonenses. As such, white migrants to Limón, who choose to self-identify as Limonense, must conform to blackness as a normative status embodied in certain cultural practices, but without the racial qualifier. The result is a partial inversion of the *carretera*'s white terminus at the black point of origin, with the crucial caveat that total social incorporation into the *communitas* of blackness does not hinge on phenotype but on cultural practice.

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