



## Re/Making La Negrita: Culture as an Aesthetic System in Costa Rica

**ABSTRACT** In this article, I examine the production of meaning in the veneration of La Negrita, the black Madonna and patroness of Costa Rica. Both an apparition and an icon, La Negrita is a 20-centimeter, dark-colored statue of the Virgin Mary that appeared to a mulata girl on the outskirts of the colonial city of Cartago in 1635. Throughout the ensuing 400 years, La Negrita has been remade in the image of hegemony, even as the experience of her perceived power has challenged that ideological and coercive project. Through an analysis of this historical progression, I argue for a theory of culture as an aesthetic system, where the egalitarianism of experience is always in conflict with the authoritarianism of meaning. [Keywords: aesthetics, culture, religion, Black Madonna, Costa Rica]

“La Virgen saved my daughter’s life.”

**I**T IS FEBRUARY 2, 2005. Maria is seated on the plastic-covered sofa in her living room, while Adriana, who is 16 years old, slices cake at the dining table. They are alone, as usual, in their prefabricated house on an isolated road above the small farming community of Pacayas in the volcanic mountains of northeast Costa Rica. Maria’s husband and son spend most of their time working for local potato farmers or at a nearby dairy and can be gone for weeks at a time.

“She was only two years old,” continues Maria, “and she had a tumor in her throat. Cancer. We spent weeks in the hospital, and the doctors said she was going to die.”

Adriana brings slices of cake, meant for her brother who could not come home for his birthday, and sits near her mother. Maria describes how she and her husband Manuel took Adriana to the basilica in Cartago, the relatively bustling city that sprawls in a valley 20 kilometers away. There, on a high altar in the cinderblock basilica, sits La Virgen de los Angeles, “La Negrita,” a 20-centimeter stone carving of the Madonna and child and the official patroness of Costa Rica. Behind the church, in a sunken pavilion, Maria and Manuel bathed their child in the spring water said to have erupted from the rock on which La Negrita appeared.

“When we returned to the hospital,” explains Maria, “the cancer was gone, completely gone. No one could explain it. It was a miracle of La Virgen.”

The story of Maria, Adriana, and the miracle of La Virgen de los Angeles is one of thousands of such stories

told by Costa Ricans who have made the pilgrimage to the basilica in Cartago to worship the diminutive image of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Indeed, reliquaries full of tiny pewter arms, legs, hearts, and crutches attest to the miraculous healings attributed to La Virgen, popularly known as La Negrita.

Associated as she is with healings and other miracles, La Negrita is like many other apparitions and icons of the Virgin Mary—except for the fact that she is neither and both an apparition and an icon. That is to say, unlike La Virgen de Guadalupe in Mexico or Our Lady of Lourdes in France, La Negrita was not a bodily apparition of the Virgin Mary with a message to impart. Nor, like Our Lady of Czestochowa in Poland or even La Virgen de Ujarras who is still venerated in Costa Rica, was La Negrita an icon of Mary that later became associated with miraculous events. In fact, rather uniquely, La Negrita was an apparition of an icon—a mute object inserted into colonial Costa Rica and left to influence the production of meaning over the course of nearly 400 years.

In this article, I explore this influence, from La Negrita’s appearance to a mulata girl in the 1630s to her appropriation by white elites in Cartago in 1782, her adoption as national patroness in 1824, and her contemporary adoration and disassociation with colonial slavery. But more specifically, what follows is an analysis of culture as an aesthetic system, whereby meaning is produced and reproduced through the attachment of value to experience; in this case, the experience of worshipping a tiny stone carving of the Madonna and child (see Figure 1).



FIGURE 1. La Negrita. (Photo by author)

### CULTURE AS AN AESTHETIC SYSTEM

A traditional preoccupation with culture as a system of shared meaning would no doubt find a rich site of analysis in the story of La Negrita and her adoration through the centuries. Unfortunately, “meaning”—however it is defined—is rarely shared as much as it is constrained by social relationships of power. Indeed, the popular conflation of culture and meaning without an attendant analysis of power has led Lila Abu-Lughod (1991), among others (e.g., Clifford and Marcus 1986), to reject the concept of culture as unavoidably essentialist. A potentially more productive approach, one that incorporates not only what culture means but also how meaning is produced, reframes culture as an aesthetic system.

Aesthetics has unfortunately become a byword of Western elitism because of its rather narrow formulation in post-Enlightenment philosophy. Despite constructive correctives like Pierre Bourdieu’s *Distinction* (1984), and the recent work of other anthropologists (Coote 1992; Morphy 1992), many social theorists still view aesthetics as restricted to Thorstein Veblen’s leisure class (Veblen 1994; cf. Gell 1992; Maquet 1986). But my use here relies on a pragmatist, anti-Kantian approach to aesthetics, predicated on what Alain Locke described as the “primary processes of valuation” (Harris 1989:38) as they relate to experience and the re-creation of experience through cultural production (cf. Dewey 1934; Sharman 2001b, 2002; Shusterman 2000).

Experience here is defined in the pragmatist sense of “an experience,” or what phenomenologists refer to as “bracketed experience.” Both allude to an affective response to salient moments in the temporal flow, moments to which meaning adheres only after the fact (cf. Bruner 1986; Dewey 1934; Dilthey 1976; Dufrenne 1973; Merleau-Ponty 1989; Turner 1986). This is not an argument for a reductionist, “natural” view of experience as precultural but, rather, one against the equally reductionist, discursive view of culture as “meaning.”<sup>1</sup> Crucial to this argument is a distinction between the perception of value and the production of meaning as two parts of an aesthetic system. Experience, of course, occurs in a particular cultural context that indexes an experience as significant. Meaning, on the other hand, does not occur at all but must be produced to “make sense” of a significant event. I am highlighting here the difference between a significant event, and an event’s significance, or as I have argued elsewhere, an event can both have meaning and be meaningful (Sharman 2001b).

The anthropology of meaning (structuralist, symbolic, interpretive) tends to conflate culture and meaning, marginalizing experience and value if not dismissing them altogether. Victor Turner, in writing about experience and its relation to the production of meaning, viewed the aesthetic phenomenon of value attachment as a power requiring subjugation: “It is the heroic combination of will and thought that opposes value by the integrating power of relation-establishing meaning” (Turner 1986:36). Turner viewed this “heroic will” as diffused, constructive, and generally benign, if not actually positive.

Antonio Gramsci, who noted the same dynamic between experience and meaning (or as he would put it, feeling and knowing, see Gramsci 1971:418), recognized that power was personal, not ideational. Meaning did not have any integrating power, people had power; “meaning” was a tool produced by the organic intellectuals of the dominant class to create consent among the subaltern (Gramsci 1971; cf. Crehan 2002). In other words, what becomes recreated as socially valued experience in the aesthetic system outlined above is rooted in relations of power that are hegemonic in the Gramscian sense.

Gramsci adds a critical understanding of power to Turner’s view of the production of meaning, but in keeping with my emphasis on the aesthetic phenomenon of value attachment, I hope to add a more nuanced understanding of agency to both. That is, in an aesthetic system, meaning is produced out of the fundamentally aesthetic process of value attachment. In this system, the egalitarianism of experience is always in conflict with the authoritarianism of meaning. Agency is not delegated to intellectuals as it is in Gramsci’s formulation, it is inherent in the democratic quality of “an experience,” which is able to “repudiate all pasts” (Turner 1986:36). This is precisely why a significant event stands out from an event’s significance; one proceeds from the other, leaving just enough space to threaten hegemony. That is to say, there is a dialectical tension

between the immediacy of experience and the mediation of power that forces constant revision.

This is visible throughout the history of La Negrita. As an object of religious worship, she fits well with phenomenological understandings of spiritual experience, what Thomas Csordas (2004) has pinned to a confrontation with alterity. La Negrita is both wholly Other and intimate, producing a phenomenologically bracketed experience—a salient moment of religious awe. So, La Negrita is meaningful as “an experience” of spiritual–social alterity, but, as we shall see, she is also given meaning by organic and traditional intellectuals.

### THE APPARITION

The following account of the apparition of La Negrita was the first written record of the event since the oral tradition began in the 1630s:

In the area that is today “Los Pardos” there lived a simple woman. Upon a rock, near a spring . . . this humble mulata encountered the extraordinary image. . . . In her home, she put it in a box and returned to collecting sticks. A second time that same amazing sculpture appeared upon the rock. This repetition did not concern her: she took the image thinking that there were two just the same. But the holy Queen was having fun with this simple soul because when the woman came near the rock again, she encountered the same apparition for the third time. Afraid and unsure she went to the box and did not find the other images except for the one she was carrying. She ran to the priest and explained her case. After hearing the story, the priest put the image in a chest. . . . But the image disappeared from there as well, and for a fourth time she was found in the field upon the same rock by the priest and the same woman. From there she was returned and placed in the Tabernacle . . . [The next day] he opened the Tabernacle and the Image of Mary was not there. . . . Resolved, the parish priest and congregation went to the rock, where they found her once again. . . . A thatched roof was built over the rock while her Sanctuary was constructed, and Cartago and its surroundings celebrated the apparition with great joy (Bonilla 1985:127–129).<sup>2</sup>

Penned in 1826 by Miguel Bonilla, a Cartago priest, the preceding account lacks a specific date and a name for the mulata woman (both of these would be “fixed” in 1934), but it conforms in general to most early versions of the apparition. By the early 17th century, the approximate time of La Negrita’s apparition, Costa Rica was a well-established if somewhat isolated outpost of Spain’s New World Empire. Contemporary popular history often portrays this colonial period as one of classless cooperation among an almost completely Spanish population, where settlers had “to cultivate the land with their own hands” for lack of Indigenous or African slaves (Borge 1941:23; cf. Meléndez Chaverri 1991; Monge Alfaro 1980). Criticized as a “white myth” of racial exceptionalism (Bourgeois 1989; Creedman 1977; Duncan and Meléndez 1972; Gudmundson 1986; Putnam 1999), this account was produced in spite of extensive archival evidence of African and Indigenous slavery and

miscegenation (Cáceras 1999; Lobo and Meléndez 1999), not to mention the racialized aspects of the apparition story itself (the “humble mulata” living among “los Pardos”).<sup>3</sup> In fact, records show that between 1625 and 1644, during the time of the apparition of La Negrita, the African and part-black population of Cartago grew from eight percent of the total population to nearly 20 percent (Olien 1980; Thiel 2001:137).<sup>4</sup>

By the 1630s, the free, part-black population of the highland central valley had increased precipitously, creating autonomous communities in the mountains around Cartago beyond the reach of colonial authorities (Borge 1941; Gil Zúñiga 1985; Sanabria Martínez 1985). Referred to at the time as *mulatos*, they were more likely to earn their freedom and become wage earners than their African counterparts. In addition to wanting to harness this “middle sector” of local labor (Olien 1980), colonial governors were intent on using *mulatos* as conscripted military personnel, offering officer posts to those willing to settle closer to the colonial capitol (Cáceras 1997).

Along with the colonial government, the Catholic Church also had an interest in drawing the free mulato population closer to Cartago. At least as early as 1627, a parish priest had tried to evangelize the widely dispersed mulato population of Cartago by building a small chapel to the east of the city. Sometime later, a mulata girl found the statue as related in the apparition narrative. By 1639, the first shrine to La Negrita was under construction, and in 1648 a lay custodian was appointed to promote the apparition and collect funds for a new church (Borge 1941; Sanabria Martínez 1985).

But by 1650, veneration of La Negrita remained limited to a handful of residents around the small shrine. Two priests took charge of the shrine and enlisted the help of the new colonial governor. The governor, motivated by the military and economic need for mulato labor, designated the area around the church of La Negrita as a segregated community of nonwhite residents (Borge 1941; Gil Zúñiga 1985; Sanabria Martínez 1985). This move coincided with the regional bishop’s decision to fix August 2 as the official date of the apparition and to establish La Cofradía, a lay organization charged with maintaining and promoting the worship of La Negrita (Fernández Guardia 1985).

La Cofradía enlisted the membership of mulato residents along with Spaniards and mestizos. Once embraced by black and part-black devotees, nonblack settlers abandoned La Negrita. By the 1670s, *mulatos* had complete control over the organization (Fernández Guardia 1985). Moreover, the larger church itself seemed to lose interest in La Negrita when, in 1674, the last of the two presiding priests died. According to Victor Sanabria Martínez, a 20th-century bishop and one of the most respected historians of La Negrita: “The priests that followed . . . considered devotion to the Virgen de los Angeles something only blacks could be interested in” (Sanabria Martínez 1985:211).

In 1676, a new governor granted residents title to the lands around the shrine of La Negrita. The official name

of the new settlement was La Puebla de Nuestra Señora de los Angeles, although it would continue to be known as La Puebla de los Pardos (Borge 1941; Sanabria Martínez 1985). For the following 40 years, La Negrita was La Virgen de los Pardos, as segregated as her devotees from the rest of colonial Costa Rica. According to one historian, “in the beginning, and for a long time afterwards, devotion to [La Negrita] was only from the lower classes, the Indians and especially the blacks and mulatos of La Puebla de los Angeles who lived separately from the whites of Cartago” (Fernández Guardia 1985:566).

It would seem that a particular discourse quickly developed around the site of the apparition—evidence of the event’s significance and the efficiency of the church and colonial state in manufacturing meaning. Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, the non-Spaniard population in Costa Rica, particularly in Cartago, outnumbered Spanish settlers who retained all of the political and economic power. It was a dynamic common in colonial Latin America, and one that often required the deployment of Marian images to create consent and maintain power. In Mexico, the apparition of Our Lady of Guadalupe came to symbolize mestizo ethnic solidarity in the years after independence, but for three centuries prior it was actively promoted by church and colonial state authorities in an effort to subdue Indigenous resistance (Taylor 1987; see also Turner 1974; Wolf 1958). Similarly, the cult of La Negrita began as an invention of the church and colonial state to organize the growing mulato population around Cartago. Like La Virgen de Guadalupe, devotion to La Negrita was not serendipitous; it required powerful actors to produce the structures necessary to attract worship.

But there is a gap between this hegemonic discourse and the power inherent in the experience of La Negrita, and by extension, the so-called mulato population. Here, we can productively distinguish between value and meaning, both products of culture as an aesthetic system, and as such part of an ongoing dialectic that shapes experience, indexes value, and eventually produces meaning. Values, as Turner points out, “are not meaningfully connected” (1986:36), but they are experienced in a particular aesthetic context that indexes what is, and is not, significant. This is a qualitative process, the “value-mode” of Alain Locke’s formulation (Harris 1989:38), around which meaning must be produced to regulate or manage the “power of value” (Turner 1986:36). Again, in Turner’s view, “perhaps value will become meaning, but it must be responsibly sifted first” (1986:36). Value must be subdued by meaning, only because meaning is constantly assailed by the process of valuation, leaving hegemonic discourse to constantly revise its own response to the agency of experience.

The apparition of La Virgen, as an icon of Catholic maternalism intended to subdue and control the non-Spanish population, became “an experience” that indexed the antistructural position of free black and part-black inhabitants around Cartago, marking an important challenge to the authoritarianism of meaning. The proliferation of racial

terminology—*mulato*, *pardo*, *zambo*—was just one way colonial elites attempted to give meaning to “an experience” of inhabitants that were “out of bounds.” But this project required constant maintenance and remained susceptible to the power of value to influence the production of meaning. In the process of valuation, La Virgen became La Negrita, an icon not of the archetypal Virgin Mary but of the black and part-black population itself. Thus, the interchangeability between Puebla de los Angeles and Puebla de los Pardos, the synonymous use of La Virgen de los Angeles and La Negrita, and even the ecclesiastical abdication of La Virgen de los Angeles as “something only blacks could be interested in” (Sanabria Martínez 1985:211). The production of meaning dictated that La Virgen was a Spanish symbol used to create consent among the black population, but experience forced a remaking such that La Negrita became a black symbol used to further segregate the colonial population. This distance, embodied by La Negrita, would force yet another remaking by the church and colonial state—an appropriation not only of La Negrita but also the perceived power of her embodied blackness.

#### THE APPROPRIATION

In 1723, the Irazu volcano, which towers over Cartago, erupted, and La Negrita was processed through the city for the first time to invoke the protection of the Virgin Mary. Until then, another icon of Mary, La Virgen de Ujarras, located ten kilometers away in the town of Paraiso, had traditionally been used to invoke the power of the Blessed Mother (Prado 1989). This shift in emphasis to the more local icon was, at least in part, because of the devotion of the new governor, don Diego de la Haya, but whatever the cause, 1723 marks a turn in the wider devotion of La Negrita. As Sanabria Martínez asserts, the year 1723 marked “a step toward the proclamation of the patronage of La Virgen de los Angeles, already more than, as it had been, just over the Puebla de los Pardos, but also over the city of Cartago” (Sanabria Martínez 1985:214).

In 1725, de la Haya was elected head of La Cofradía and would remain so until he left the province. This began a tradition of electing the standing governor of Costa Rica to head of La Cofradía throughout the 18th century (Fernández Guardia 1985). In 1737, the clergy of Cartago publicly recognized the apparition of La Negrita in the Puebla de los Pardos and confessed that she “had been totally isolated ... [and] lacking in veneration” because of their own “disgraceful irreverence” (Sanabria Martínez 1985:214). Two years later, the regional bishop declared August 2 an official holiday, establishing a tradition of public festivities surrounding the feast day of La Negrita (Brenes and Feoli 1995; Gil Zúñiga 1985; Sanabria Martínez 1985).

The first stage of the appropriation of La Negrita by colonial society in 1723 was an abrupt end to nearly 40 years of spiritual quarantine in La Puebla de los Pardos. During this process, La Negrita seemed no longer “something only blacks could be interested in” and was moved to a more

central position in the “culture” of colonial Cartago, and by extension, colonial Costa Rica.

This is particularly curious given the existence of the other powerful icon of the Virgin Mary, La Virgen de Ujarras, which in 1666 miraculously repelled a band of invading pirates to the east of Cartago (Prado 1989). Ever since that miracle occurred, La Virgen de Ujarras had been venerated as a powerful intercessor and often used as a talisman against erupting volcanoes, floods, and disease. But when the regional bishop eventually declared Cartago’s patroness in 1782, he named the relatively obscure La Negrita, not the already popular Virgen de Ujarras. Granted, La Virgen de Ujarras made no miraculous apparition; “she” was a wooden statue known to have floated ashore on the Atlantic coast from a Spanish ship. But given the racialized discourse produced by the church and state, the selection of La Negrita is made more puzzling given that La Virgen de Ujarras was and is considered specifically white.

It would appear the colonial church and state believed La Negrita wielded a power La Virgen de Ujarras did not—or at least, not as effectively. Following my argument above, this power to autonomously act in the world despite a carefully controlled hegemony derived from the gap between a discourse that relegated La Negrita to the subaltern and the experience of an icon that remained “out of bounds” at the margins of society. In other words, La Negrita’s power was intimately connected to her blackness. It was a threat to hegemony that required subjugation and appropriation by the “will and thought” of colonial authorities.

The “threat” of blackness to colonial hegemony can be viewed as rooted in the structural position of non-white inhabitants as social *liminars* (Turner 1974), “out of bounds” and therefore dangerous, as I have argued elsewhere in relation to postcolonial migrant laborers in Costa Rica (Sharman 2001a). Similarly, Peter Wade (1993), among others (Guss 1998; Rahier 1998; Taussig 1987), discusses the “threat” of blackness as rooted in their perceived lack of socialization, an imagined and fetishized primitivism. 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 with La Negrita and her mulato devotees, Wade argues that black inhabitants are perceived to “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).

Building on these explanations for the threat of blackness to colonial hegemony, the theoretical thread of this article suggests that hegemony, as manifest in the authoritarianism of meaning, is threatened by the agency of experience. Blackness, whether embodied by people or icons of the Virgin Mary, is dangerous and powerful because of the gap between its supposed structural position as “out of bounds” (its “meaning” as produced by elites) and the experience of its autonomy (its resistance to coercive or consensual control). Indeed, far from remaining isolated in La

Puebla de los Pardos, the mulato population of Cartago had increased dramatically to 1,013 by the time of Governor de la Haya’s initial appropriation of La Negrita in the 1720s. By 1741, *mulatos*, *zambos*, and those without racial specification stood at 2,025, which was equal to 35 percent of the total population of Cartago (Thiel 2001:189, 297). Blackness, as the embodiment of this growing threat to hegemony, was itself embodied in La Negrita, the very object produced by the elite in an attempt to subjugate the non-white population.

To manage consent and maintain hegemony, the colonial elite had to subdue the egalitarianism of experience with the authoritarianism of meaning, producing knowledge to discipline the subaltern’s “feelings” (Crehan 2002:130) about La Negrita and her structural position vis-à-vis the church and state. But in the dialectic of culture as an aesthetic system, the value-mode structures the production of meaning even as meaning subdues value. So in the 18th century, the colonial elite’s experience of their own icon was shaped by the power of value to refigure La Virgen as La Negrita, a specifically Black Madonna. The result was a gap between “relation-establishing meaning” (Turner 1986:36) produced by the intellectuals of church and state and this new value-mode and its ability to shape experience.

Evidence of this gap can be found in the so-called pagan traditions that arose around her feast day beginning in 1739. Sanabria Martínez describes how La Cofradía introduced “scandalous” abuses, such as dressing as Indians in procession to La Negrita as well as drinking, dancing, and bull fights (Sanabria Martínez 1985:213). During the 20 or so days surrounding August 2, contemporaries called the headquarters of La Cofradía, built by de la Haya, the “House of the Congregation of iniquity and lodging of all Hell” (Fernández Guardia 1985:570). Since the appropriation of the icon, colonial elites were living in the space between value and meaning, where the heroic “will and thought” had yet to subdue the power of value associated with La Negrita. But this would not last long.

In 1782, a local priest summoned the regional bishop from Nicaragua to investigate the alleged abuses. His solution was radical and somewhat surprising. First, he ordered the icon moved from the basilica to another church in the city during the festival; if he could not stop the licentious behavior, he could at least remove La Negrita from its vicinity. The move, known as La Pasada, continues to be an important part of the August celebrations.<sup>5</sup> Second, the bishop declared La Negrita the official patroness of the city of Cartago (Alvarez Masís 1995; Borge 1941; Gil Zúñiga 1985; Sanabria Martínez 1985). The response of the bishop was an attempt by traditional intellectuals to control the experience of the icon, physically and semantically, both for the subaltern and for organic intellectuals who had apparently failed in their maintenance of hegemony. It was a further appropriation of the image, subduing the power of value through the production of meaning, but it also marked an important split between traditional and organic

intellectuals that would further undermine the maintenance of hegemony in the coming century.

### LA NEGRITA AND THE BIRTH OF COSTA RICAN NATIONALISM

La Negrita's colonial appropriation as patroness of Cartago in 1782 set the stage for a new nationalist appropriation just 40 years later when all of Central America broke away from Spain's control in the wake of Mexico's independence struggle. Although a clear sense of nationalism would take a half century to form in opposition to unification plans for the Central American states, Costa Rican exceptionalism would assert itself early in the formation of Congress and the declaration of La Negrita as official patroness of the newly independent state of Costa Rica. Despite the battles that raged both rhetorically and militarily throughout the 19th century over the question of national sovereignty, La Negrita found herself thrust into the spotlight as a symbol of independence from both Spain and the rest of Central America.

It was during this formative period, specifically the 1820s, that Bonilla penned the first written account of the apparition, quoted above. The publication of Bonilla's account marked a new nationalist appropriation of La Negrita as well as a new emphasis on the technology of cultural production. Accounts of the apparition, published and mass produced, proliferated throughout the 19th century, as did literacy rates within Costa Rica, historically one of the highest in the Americas. Several writers in the 19th century concretized the oral tradition of the apparition with few variations.<sup>6</sup>

The proliferation of printed accounts of the apparition during the 19th century was part of a much-wider process of legitimization produced by the organic intellectuals of the new nationalist political movement. Steven Palmer (1993) has convincingly demonstrated that the resistance in Costa Rica to federalist movements in Central America was fought as much by cultural production as by military mobilization, as evidenced by the apotheosis of Juan Santamaria. Santamaria, a mulato foot soldier, was said to have helped flush out William Walker in a decisive battle against the U.S.-backed pirate in 1856. More than 30 years later, members of the ruling elite resurrected the event through daily newspapers and political speeches in opposition to unification plans of the late 1880s. By the 1890s, Santamaria had become a symbol employed by the liberal state to both fend off Central American federalism and create consent among the masses for the postcolonial oligarchy. Like La Negrita and the young girl to whom she appeared, Santamaria "has no voice that might be reclaimed. He is an inarticulate member of the dark, undifferentiated ranks of the passive classes. He can never speak for himself or his class, he can only be defined by the oligarchy" (Palmer 1993:64).

Jose Gil Zúñiga (1985) has argued a similar role for La Negrita during this same period. Gil Zúñiga asserts that the church "manipulated" the cult of La Negrita as a symbol of "proto-nationalism" leading up to indepen-

dence (Gil Zúñiga 1985:71–77). Following independence and throughout the 19th century, the state continued to co-opt the icon in efforts to consolidate popular support behind the ruling elite. But according to Gil, it was not until the 1880s, the same period of Santamaria's ideological resurrection, that the church began to promote the idea that "the cult of the Virgin and Costa Rican nationality were one in the same" (Gil Zúñiga 1985:82). By the turn of the century, the ruling elite had effectively harnessed the ideological power of two iconic figures, Juan Santamaria and La Negrita, both of whom "had no voice to be reclaimed" and both of whom would be remade in the image of hegemony.

By the end of the 19th century, the ruling elite had effectively harnessed the ideological power of La Negrita and Santamaria to be remade in the image of hegemony. But both icons referenced a racial history that many in 19th-century Costa Rica were eager to forget. Although the importation of African slave labor disappeared by the 1750s, mulatos continued to be used as slaves in Costa Rica up until the official abolition of slavery in 1824 (Meléndez Obando 1999). Even then, manumission was a complicated and lengthy process involving reparations from the state to slave owners for their loss of property. By the time of independence, according to Mauricio Meléndez Obando, the tracks of the nonwhite population "disappeared from the documents and the collective memory, believing—at the popular level—the illusion of their non-existence" (Meléndez Obando 1999:53).

By appropriating La Negrita as a tool of consent, the ruling elite remade the icon in their own image, whitewashing its blackness and relocating its power in the object itself (see Figure 2). But like similar efforts in the colonial period, there remains a gap between value and meaning, where La Negrita not only has meaning as an icon of nationalism but also is meaningful as an object to be experienced. Thus, the struggle for postcolonial power between San José and Cartago was often manifest in a physical struggle over control of the statue itself. At one point, the icon was carried off as a spoil of war by San José loyalists and kept in the new capital for seven years. And it was during this period that La Negrita was actually stolen from her basilica at least twice, which was something unheard of in the centuries she sat unguarded before her appropriation by the state.

The new nationalists of 19th-century Costa Rica were intent on producing meaning for an emergent citizenry, and La Negrita became one of many powerful symbols in this hegemonic project. But not unlike the appropriation of La Negrita at the end of the 18th century, the process of valuation undermined the production of meaning. Meaning, produced by the church and then appropriated by the state, created the context in which the object could be experienced as significant. But that experience produced a value mode that undermined the power of organic intellectuals to manage meaning. The discourse about the object could not compete with the value of the object itself. That is to say, La Negrita became a powerful object, not simply a powerful idea. This dialectic between value and meaning underscores



**FIGURE 2.** The “whitened” apparition. (Photo by author)

the argument that culture is processual, bound up in an aesthetic system that is intersected by the power of discourse and the agency of experience.

As this process unfolded throughout the 19th century, La Negrita not only was bound up in her own remaking by the new state but also used as a wedge in the widening division between church and state in Costa Rica. The politics of liberalism left little room for ecclesiastical authority, and the state’s appropriation of La Negrita from the church was not unlike the church’s appropriation of La Negrita from La Puebla de los Pardos. The marginalization of the church in Costa Rican politics would increase into the 20th century, especially as communism strengthened its political position in the 1930s. Perhaps ironically, the perception of power as an experience of the icon itself, quite apart from its culturally produced meaning as a symbol of nationalism, would create the conceptual space necessary to enable the church to remake La Negrita once again. This time, cultural production would come full circle, with La Negrita positioned as an icon of Catholic maternalism in an effort to control an increasingly unwieldy population, which this time was defined by class rather than race.

#### **LA NEGRITA, COMMUNISM, AND THE LIBERAL STATE**

For Costa Rica, the 20th century began with the rise of communism, the secularization of the liberal state, and the

threat of irrelevance for the Catholic Church. In many ways, it ended in similar fashion. The result was a century-long remaking of La Negrita by the traditional intellectuals of the church in response to her abandonment by the secular state.

The 1935 tricentennial celebration of the apparition of La Negrita was a convenient fiction, invented and admitted to by bishop Sanabria Martínez. There had always been great debate as to the exact date of the apparition, and the year in many accounts ranged from as early as 1630 to as late as 1641 (Blanco Segura 1967; Gil Zúñiga 1985). On August 25, 1934, Sanabria Martínez published an essay that would become the definitive statement on the apparition, fixing the year at 1635, and thereby establishing an historical justification for the tricentennial celebration in 1935 (Sanabria Martínez 1985).

On the same day that Sanabria Martínez fixed the year of La Negrita’s apparition, the United Fruit Company (UFC) accepted the government’s plan to end the largest labor strike in the young nation’s history. The strike, organized by the Communist Party, crippled the tropical fruit export industry, the most powerful economic interest in Costa Rica. It was a major political victory for the communists who had first organized in the Caribbean port city of Limón.

Since the late 19th century, the United Fruit Company had exercised complete control over the Atlantic coast of the country, importing a largely black West Indian labor force and exporting the profits to its offices in Europe and the United States (Bourgeois 1989; Chomsky 1995; Harpelle 2001; Purcell 1993). Despite the history of black and part-black settlement in the highlands, the response to this influx of black migrant labor was distinctly racialized. Quotes like those from newspapers in the 1930s vividly express the perceptions of Limón held by Costa Ricans in the highlands: “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” (Jones 1935:41). It seems the white myth of racial purity had taken firm hold by the 1930s.

By the time of the labor strike of 1934, many of the black laborers imported since the late 19th century had become small landowners supplying bananas for export to the UFC. Most of those organized by the communists for the strike were in fact Nicaraguan migrants and “white” Costa Ricans who had left the declining coffee industry in search of more stable employment. Black settlers stubbornly refused to participate in the dispute, and were maligned as collaborators with U.S. imperialism by the Communist Party (Harpelle 2001).

In the aftermath of the strike, the Communist Party gained unprecedented political capital and Afro-Caribbean migrants lost what little power they once had in the Atlantic zone (Harpelle 2001). Ironically, the foothold gained by communists in national politics would precipitate a decisive civil war in 1948 that disbanded the Communist Party and set Costa Rica on a path toward social democracy and



**FIGURE 3.** August 2, La Basilica de Nuestra Señora de los Angeles, Cartago, Costa Rica. (Photo by author)

eventually economic neoliberalism (Edelman 1999; Merino del Río 1996; Molina Jiménez 2002). In the meantime, neither the pre-Civil War liberal state nor the Communist Party saw a role for the Catholic Church.

Sanabria Martínez's essay, which fixed the year of La Negrita's apparition at 1635, must be viewed in this political and historical context. Published the same day as the resolution of the strike in 1934, the essay set the stage for a massive celebration of La Negrita's tricentennial the following year. Coinciding with the tricentennial celebration, Sanabria Martínez published an exhaustive history of La Negrita, which included the historical invention of a name for the young girl who found the icon, Juana de Pereira (Borge 1941; Sanabria Martínez 1985). The celebration, organized around August 2, 1935, inaugurated a nationwide pilgrimage to the basilica in Cartago, an event that has been repeated every year since (Alvarez 1995; Arce 2000). In less than one year, Sanabria Martínez had reconsecrated the apparition of Nuestra Señora de los Angeles and once again remade La Negrita into an object of national veneration. By fixing the year of the apparition and the name of young girl of legend, Sanabria Martínez produced an historical credibility for the patroness, and by reinvigorating the feast day, especially through the somatic experience of a pilgrimage

to the site, he had reproduced a cultural materiality for La Negrita (see Figures 3 and 4).

Fifty years later, much had changed in the political landscape of Costa Rica. The Civil War disbanded the military and outlawed the Communist Party, and black migrants were given citizenship and the freedom to move out of the Caribbean coast. But by the 1980s, Daniel Ortega had successfully brought communism to power in neighboring Nicaragua and Costa Rica w.4(po2..5(and)-mr208.6(w.)-288.5(anplst)e2



**FIGURE 4.** The end of the Pilgrimage. (Photo by author)

imagination, and plaques and shrines began to appear throughout Costa Rica marking her itinerary.

This remaking of La Negrita in the mid-1980s reflects in many ways the ramping up of cultural production 50 years earlier, when the church felt marginalized if not outright threatened by the rise of communism. In this most modern remaking, La Negrita is fully disassociated with questions of race and remade in the image of the rural working class. Her itinerant visitation of agrarian communities, especially in an era of massive foreign investment and *latifundismo* (cf. Edelman 1992), marked her insertion into the hegemony of neoliberalism.

This was confirmed by subtle changes in certain aspects of ritual worship. One of these was the *vesticion*, the ceremonial dressing of the icon performed on August 1. Under her jewel-encrusted golden vestment, a tiny cloth dress adorns the stone statue. For years this dress was made by two women in Cartago. Each year, behind closed doors, priests would unveil the icon and change the dress. But during this time of remaking, the *vesticion* was opened to the public, not only to view the ceremony but also to contribute their own dresses. Now, women from around the country send in hundreds of tiny dresses for the ceremony, and in front

of thousands of people, the priests carefully try on each submission allowing the applause of the congregants to determine which dress will adorn La Negrita for the year to come (see Figure 5).

As part of this class-based remaking of La Negrita, the disconnection between the apparition and the original black presence in colonial Costa Rica was made complete, and the church reasserted itself as a potent hegemon. By providing greater access to the icon through the pilgrimage and the *vesticion*, the church exposed devotees to the very process of valuation that had consistently undermined the production of meaning. But in this case, it was the hegemonic project of the secular state that the church was attempting to undermine. Traditional intellectuals like Sanabria Martínez challenged the discourse of the organic intellectuals of the state by allowing the value mode of a dispossessed rural working class to dismantle the meaning of La Negrita as a strictly nationalist symbol. Through its own hegemonic project—the shaping of ritual and pageantry, the publishing of books and pamphlets—the church then asserted its own “relation-establishing meaning” for the icon, subduing the emergent value mode in relation to a renewed experience of La Negrita. As such, the church was able to reassert the dominance of traditional intellectuals and the place of the church in the everyday lives of Costa Ricans. Part of this project was to disassociate La Negrita from her blackness, removing her from the dominant political discourse of the state and reframing her in the populism of the church.

By the 1980s, Limón was the only source of blackness in the Costa Rican popular imagination, and La Negrita was a black Madonna only insofar as she was dark herself. Indeed, Limonense Catholics, many of whom are black Costa Ricans, demonstrate a distinct ambivalence for La Negrita. Maureen, a retired nurse in Puerto Limón, is one of many black Costa Rican Catholics who respects La Negrita but does not view her as central to her faith. As she explains: “We never visited La Virgen when I was young.” As if to emphasize the point, she adds, “La Negrita is not black, she’s green.”

#### THE END OF THE PILGRIMAGE

Twenty years after the 350th anniversary of the apparition of La Negrita, Manuel steps out of his home in the mountains above Pacayas to begin his descent to the basilica 20 kilometers away. In the years since he and Maria bathed their daughter in the spring water beneath the shrine to cure her cancer, Manuel had remained a faithful but distant believer in La Negrita. But last year, when Maria was hospitalized for her diabetes, Manuel decided to make the pilgrimage in honor of the patroness the day before her feast day.

Maria and Adriana wave goodbye from the front door. Like last year, Manuel will make the trip without them. Quiet and even paced, he joins the trickle of pilgrims in and around Pacayas. By the time he reaches the main



**FIGURE 5.** Adoration at the *Vestición*. (Photo by author)

highway leading down into Cartago, night has fallen and the trickle has grown to a steady flow. Thousands of pilgrims, mostly agricultural laborers, make their way down the steep highway. Once in Cartago itself, the streets are jammed with the faithful, hundreds of thousands lining the streets, joining the procession from San Jose and the west coast. Manuel makes his way through the crowd, past the colored lights and live music, to the entrance of the basilica. Dropping to his knees, he shuffles the length of the main aisle toward the altar and the tiny figure of La Negrita.

Manuel's pilgrimage ends at the site of nearly 400 years of state and ecclesiastically produced meaning. From the moment of her apparition, La Negrita was made and remade in the image of hegemony, through the organic intellectuals of the colonial and independent states and the traditional intellectuals of the church. It was a contested process, but consistent in its control of meaning for the subaltern. Whether nonwhite settlers on the colonial margins, or new citizens of a fragile nation, or rural laborers in a changing economy, "culture" came ready made for the nonelite.

But Manuel's pilgrimage also ended at the site of 400 years of socially valued experience, where the revisionist tendency of an aesthetic system decentered the power of

hegemony. From the moment of her apparition, the egalitarianism of experience challenged attempts to control the meaning of La Negrita, forcing her to be remade by church and state intellectuals. But each remaking left a gap in experience, leaving just enough space to threaten hegemony once more.

La Negrita exists at the nexus of an aesthetic system, where the egalitarianism of experience is always in conflict with the authoritarianism of meaning. Meaning, as part of this ongoing process, marks the trajectory of hegemonic attempts to control the process of valuation inherent in experience. Experience marks an opposing but nonetheless tandem trajectory of revisionist evaluation. Together they offer a more nuanced understanding of culture as an aesthetic system, and what happens in the space between a significant event and an event's significance.

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#### NOTES

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1. Eve Danziger highlights the pitfalls of an approach to experience as “natural” or culture free in her recent critique of cognitive linguistics, in which she argues that cultural and linguistic categorization penetrate human perceptual understandings, including “sensory experience” (2005:66). My argument adds an analysis of power to that insight, examining how categorization is produced in an historical context, and distinguishing between the perception of value and the production of meaning.

2. This and other quotations originally published in Spanish have been translated into English by the author.

3. The range of racial terminology was as varied and creative as anywhere in the region during the colonial period. The term *pardo* often referred to a mixture of Spanish, Indian, and African but was used in the Cartago most often as a general term for nonwhites. *Mulato* was also a rather-general term for a nonwhite person but was most often reserved for those of specifically Spanish and African descent. According to Thiel's records, ecclesiastical censuses included these and many others over the course of colonial history, including *pardos*, *mulatos*, *mestizos*, *Indios*, *zambos*, *negros*, and, of course, those of “indeterminate race” (Thiel 2001).

4. In 1625, there were also 16 inhabitants of “indeterminate race” that either disappeared or were somehow “determined” by 1644. During this same period, the number of Indigenous inhabitants grew from 144 to 181 (Thiel 2001:137).

5. Today, La Pasada is celebrated with a large procession on August 3 to Iglesia de la Carmen several blocks west of the basilica. La Negrita is returned with another large procession one month later. Of course, La Pasada is hard to reconcile with the story of the apparition, where the icon miraculously returned to the same spot each time it was removed. This rather delicate logical problem also surfaced, but was ignored, when the icon was stolen (and recovered) on at least three occasions since the early 19th century.

6. These writers included Miguel Bonilla, José Brenes, Víctor Ortiz, Domingo Juarros, and Thomas Francis Meagher, all of whom were priests except for Meagher, who was a journalist and travel writer working for *New Monthly Magazine*. Brenes describes the woman as having the same dark color as the stone icon. Bonilla and Juarros use the term *mulata*, and Ortiz and Meagher write only that she was a “simple woman.” Significantly, none of these early writers use the terms *Indian* or *Indigenous*, although today almost all accounts of the apparition employ these terms.

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