

'With the Vision They See':
Identity and Aesthetic Experience in Puerto Limón, Costa Rica

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A thesis submitted as required for the D.Phil in Social and Cultural Anthropology

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'With the Vision They See': Identity and Aesthetic Experience in Puerto Limón, Costa Rica. Russell Leigh Sharman St Antony's College D.Phil. Social and Cultural Anthropology Trinity Term 1999.

This thesis examines aesthetic experience as it relates to the formation of cultural identity in the urban environment of Puerto Limón, Costa Rica. Based on twelve months of fieldwork, the thesis presents an analysis of aesthetics as a cross-cultural process of value attachment which, like identity, is founded on the dialectical relationship between the discursive realm of conceptual meaning and the non-discursive realm of lived experience.

The first of two sections in the thesis shows how identity, as the dialectic between the ideal and the experiential, fits with the concept of a cultural aesthetic, where the discursive quality of art as a symbolic system is constantly negotiated by the non-discursiveness of aesthetic experience. The first section also introduces the city of Puerto Limón through a detailed history of its development, a presentation of the contemporary context, and an analysis of an emergent ideology of blackness.

The second section divides the aesthetic practices found in Limón into four principal forms: the built environment; canvas art and small crafts; music and performance; and literature. Chapter Four discusses the broad theme of the socialisation of space and place in both the national and local contexts. Chapter Five examines a community of canvas artists who participate in constructing an ideal notion of Limonense identity. Chapter Six focuses predominantly on street bands known as *comparsas* to demonstrate the power of embodied experience to transform idealised notions of identity. Chapter Seven examines the substantial body of literature to come out of the province of Limón, and the split between women as poets and men as novelists.

Finally, the thesis offers a narrative by way of conclusion to demonstrate the complexity of presenting an ethnography of aesthetics and encourage further research in this area.

Approximately 90,000 words.

To the Creator God who has made every word possible
and to Cheryl who has helped me see beauty in them all.

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

'In San José, on that side of the country, they don't have this kind of painting'.

Rommel, seated in the open-air studio of his front porch, squinted thoughtfully at his canvas and absently continued his explanation of stylistic differences in Costa Rican art.

'If you go to Guanacaste you will find something different, Puntarenas, another style, and so on for different provinces'.

The young artist leaned into the painting to add a few more leaves to a mango tree framing several dark-skinned men loading bananas on to a freight train. The clean lines, caricatured faces, and vibrant colours all echoed the style pervasive in Limonense canvas art.

Finally, Rommel leaned back, looked up and said, 'Yes, because the people will surely paint with the vision they see'.

I originally chose Puerto Limón as a field site precisely because of what I thought I would not find there. Seeking that elusive aesthetic of everyday life worked out among a diverse population, I set out for the gritty, urban port city expecting to wade through creative nuance and aesthetic subtlety. I was prepared to piece together a culturally specific notion of aesthetic satisfaction from the mundane tedium of daily activity.

As is common in field research, I discovered a tremendous gap between my pre-conceived ideas and the reality of the ethnographic context. Here was a city where canvas artists painted on the sidewalks, *comparsa* bands paraded in the streets, and poets performed in art galleries, churches and homes. The city showed signs of neglect to be sure, but it was far from the work-a-day, anaesthetic urban sprawl I envisioned.

Sorting through the various expressive forms that constituted the Limon aesthetic, many of which I would not be able to include within the limits of a doctoral thesis, I confronted another, unexpected gap between my ideal field site and the reality of the

setting in question. Intending to examine the connections between aesthetics and identity in a diverse population, I was unprepared for the centrality of blackness to the context of Limón. This complex, variable quality of blackness in Limón life seeped into every aspect of my research.

The result is an approach to aesthetics informed by the dynamics of the specific ethnographic context. But as I took apart and then tried to piece together the data, I realised I was missing the quality of experience that inspired my particular perspective. This is perhaps most obvious in the division of aesthetic expression into the four discrete forms that constitute Part II of the thesis. While this analytical fiction is a convenient device for discussing the pertinent issues, it obscures the integration of each form into an overarching (or underlying) cultural aesthetic which makes clear divisions problematic. I have tried to compensate for this within the analysis, but also through the narrative vignettes at the beginning of each chapter. It is hoped that these small snapshots of fieldwork and Limón life, which are almost all based on actual conversations with actual people[1], will contextualise and bring balance to the analysis.

Of course, no thesis is the result of one student's efforts. I would literally have nothing to say were it not for the participation and support of Limonenses. I would especially like to thank Betty Charles and the entire Charles family whose hospitality and generosity transformed our house in barrio Roosevelt into a home. A list of other individuals in Limón who made our time there as enjoyable as it was productive would no doubt exhaust my word limit, but I would like to mention the Petersons, the Wiegners, Prudence Bellamy, Miguel Gray and our entire church family at First Baptist and the newly planted New Hope Baptist. I would also like to thank the canvas artists who allowed me to photograph their work, especially German Mora, whose painting graces

the title page of this thesis. Outside Limón, I would like to thank Quince Duncan and his family for their hospitality as well as Eulalia Bernard for her precious time. Finally, the Granados family in Cartago offered a refuge from the heat of Limón more times than we could ever truly repay them.

Back in Oxford, I am grateful for financial support from the Overseas Research Student Award, the Peter Lienhardt Memorial Fund, the Graduate Studies Office, and St Antony's College. I am also forever indebted to the faculty and staff of the School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography, who graciously encouraged my straddling the 'road' between the two. I would especially like to thank Mike Morris at the Tyler Library as well as Peter Riviere, both of whom thoughtfully suggested new acquisitions in line with my research.

While in Oxford I have had the great honour and privilege to be one of Donald Tayler's last students before his 'going freelance'. His guidance early in my research continues to serve me well. I would also like to thank Jeremy Coote for his seemingly tireless support, and for always allowing me to believe I have something worthwhile to say about aesthetics. Chris Gosden, who admirably took over from Donald Tayler, also deserves a great debt of gratitude for his insightful comments throughout the writing of the thesis, and for never complaining over the amount of reading I made *him* do. Thanks also go to Howard Morphy and Trevor Purcell for agreeing to read parts of the work in progress.

I would like to make special mention of those who helped form my ideas before coming to Oxford. Ray McAlister, Alan Klein, Christine Ward Gailey and Lynn Stephen all had a large impact on my academic development. Though some have scattered from Northeastern University, their continued support is deeply appreciated. None more so

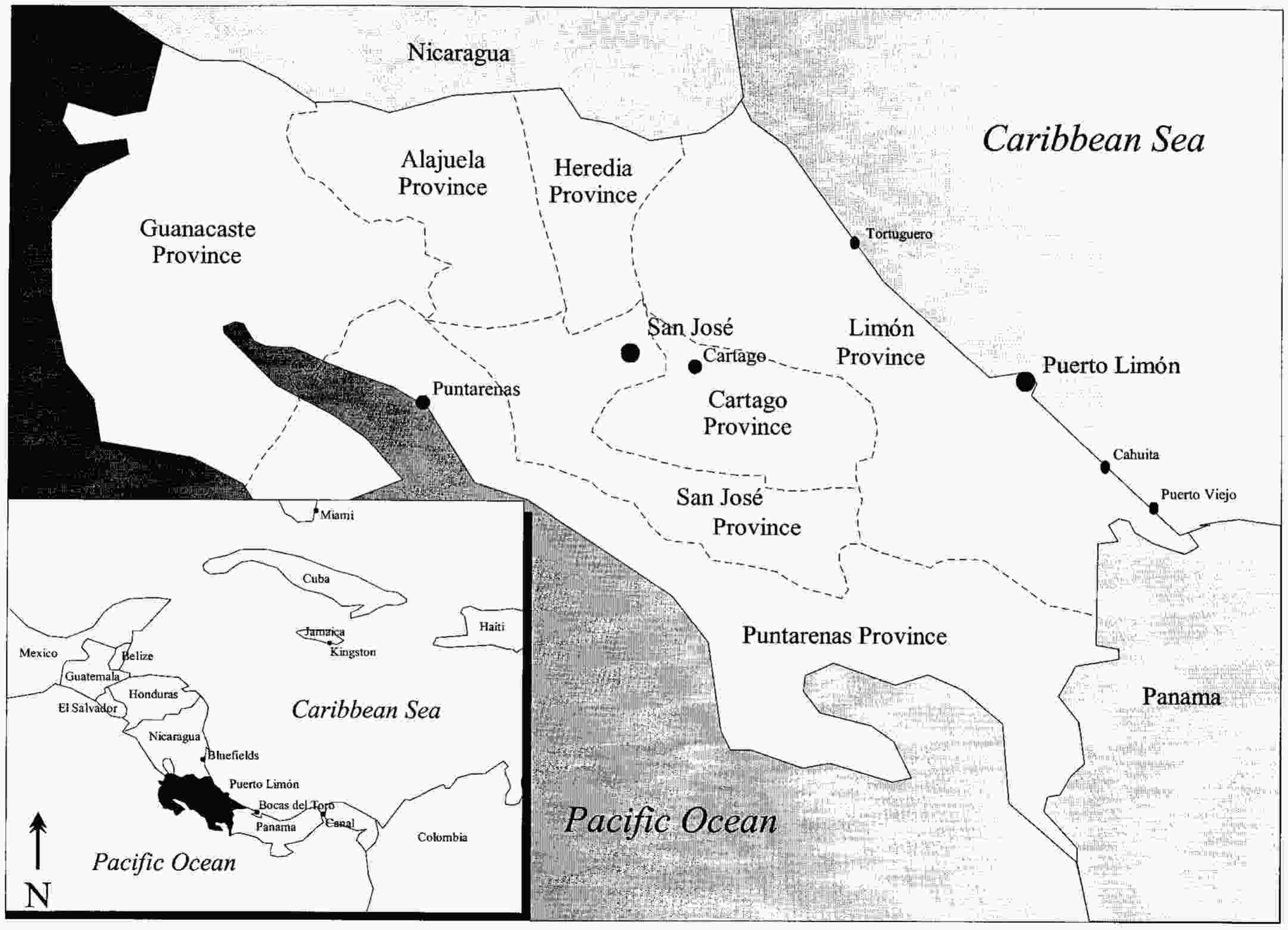
than Michael Blim, without whom I would no doubt still be waiting tables somewhere in the Carolinas. His constant support astounds me, and I only hope that of the thousands of words to follow, a few of them will make him proud.

Finally, I would like to thank my family for their support and encouragement. My parents have made so much of who I am and what I have done possible, and I pray this work marks the beginning of an intangible return on their emotional, soulful and financial investment. I have saved my wife for last partly because her support leaves me speechless and partly because she deserves such special gratitude. If I could trace the source my fascination with aesthetics and beauty I would no doubt find it in the creative power of God and His wisdom to allow my life to be so enriched by her presence. If for no other reason, this thesis is dedicated to them both.

Notes

[1] Exceptions are the epigraphs for the Introduction and Chapter Four. The legend retold in the former is from newspaper accounts fictionalised in the voice of an elderly Afro-Costa Rican (see Epilogue). The conversation quoted in the latter is from a taped interview, but the character of Darien is a composite of two informants in the interest of anonymity.

Costa Rica


Nicaragua
Caribbean Sea
Alajuela Province
Heredia Province
Guanacaste Province
Tortuguero
San José
Limón Province
Cartago
Puerto Limón
Puntarenas
Cartago Province
Cahuita
Puerto Viejo
San José Province
Puntarenas Province
Panama
Pacific Ocean
Miami
Cuba
Jamaica
Haiti
Kingston
Mexico
Belize
Guatemala
Honduras
El Salvador
Caribbean Sea
Nicaragua
Bluefields
Puerto Limón
Bocas del Toro
Panama
Canal
Colombia
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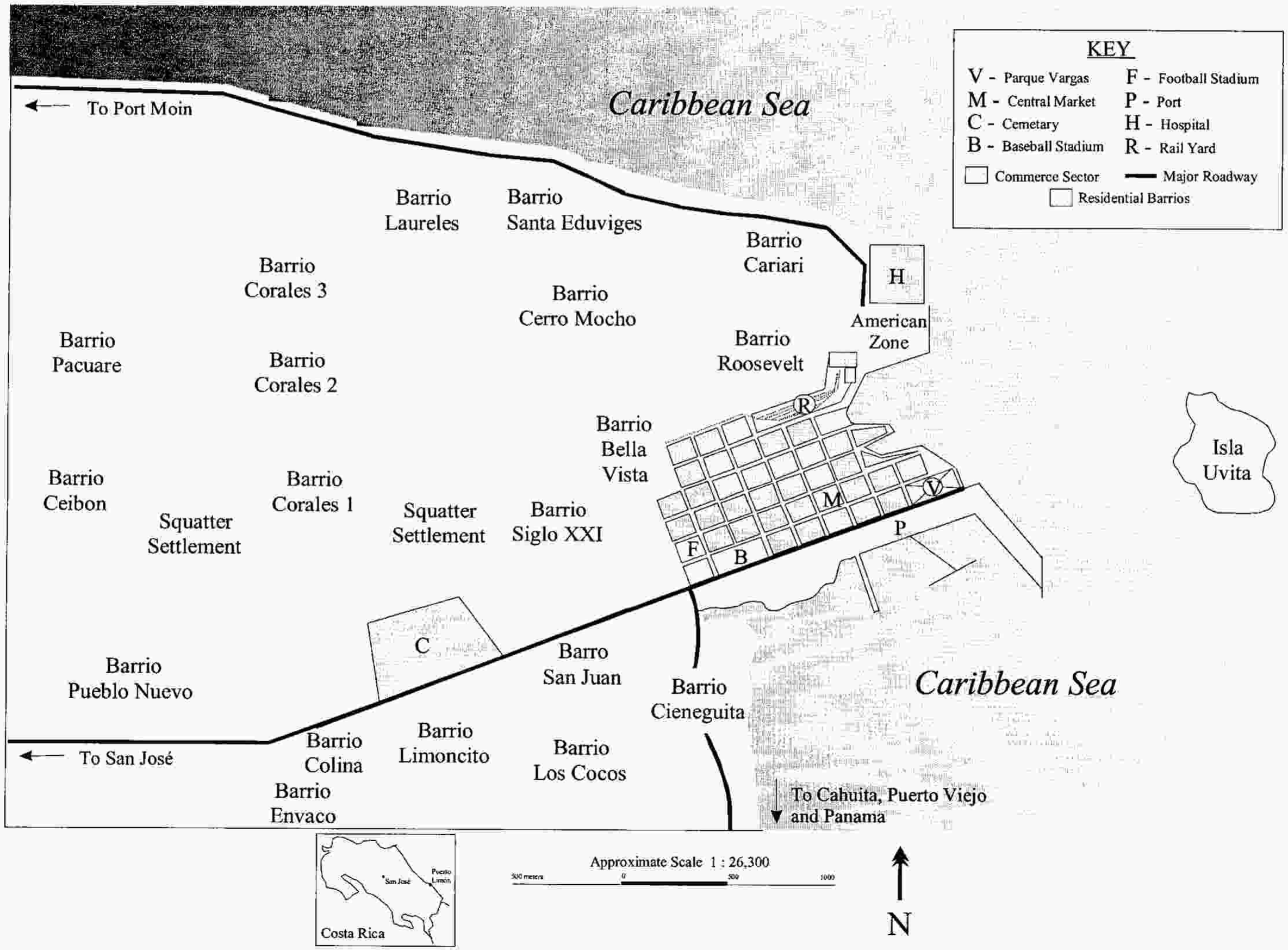
Puerto Limón, Costa Rica



INTRODUCTION

'There once was a lone lemon tree on the edge of a small natural bay'.

My nameless host spoke with both hands planted firmly on his knees and broad smile across his face.

'It was a land of few inhabitants; oppressive heat and disease kept all but the most adventurous and desperate far away in the mountains. The lemon tree was like salvation to the people of the coast who used its fruit and leaves to fight their infections and Yellow Fever. But it was the only one of its kind in the region and people would come from enormous distances to collect its precious medicine. Soon the tree became the cross-roads for travellers who were told "a half-mile from the lemon tree", or "just down from the lemon tree"'.

His eyes drifted and he laughed a far-off laugh of remembrance. Then he straightened up and looked me in the eye.

'It came as no surprise when men in suits came down from the mountains in 1867 to claim their new port that they called it Puerto Limón, "Port Lemon"'.

The port city of Puerto Limón, in the province of Limón on the Caribbean coast of Costa Rica stands on the margins of two worlds. Politically and geographically it is part of Latin America, though demographically, and arguably geographically, it is part of the Caribbean. Costa Ricans are hesitant to claim it, and Caribbean scholars have largely ignored it. As one Costa Rican friend explains, 'What do you expect? Limón is a forgotten province in a developing country'.

When I arrived in Limón in 1997, to walk the streets of the tired port city was to experience that sense of the forgotten. Seven years after a devastating earthquake the streets still lay cracked and often impassable. The city park, *Parque Vargas*, once the jewel of the province and the country, had become the home of drug dealers and prostitutes. The municipal government was rife with scandal, and the once powerful

labour unions were a shadow of their former existence. Limón had become that embarrassing relative many Costa Ricans would rather ignore, though its port continued to sustain the economy of the country.

The extent of its deterioration is most surprising in light of the relative youth of the city. Until the 1870's, Limón was a barely inhabitable tropical coastland. A few turtle hunters from Colombia or Nicaragua made it their seasonal home, and only the truly adventurous actually settled full time along the shores of this stretch of the Caribbean. It was as the nineteenth century came to a close that Costa Rican coffee merchants saw the benefit of a port on the Atlantic coast for export to Europe and the Northeast United States. And so the lemon tree that served as the landmark for the few locals at the natural bay on the Caribbean coast became the namesake of Puerto Limón.

Soon a railroad was carved out of the jungle that protected the highland Central Valley from the wilds of Limón. Thousands of Chinese and Afro-Caribbean labourers came to die laying track. Those that survived stayed on to work the banana plantations that sprang up throughout the vast tracts of land acquired by the American Minor C. Keith. Half a century later, the plantations would all have moved to the Pacific coast, a civil war would nationalise the now Afro-Costa Ricans that remained in the province, and thousands of white Costa Ricans[1] would flood Limón in search of jobs in the wake of massive land consolidation throughout Costa Rica.

The result was a cultural collision that principally involved Afro-Costa Ricans and Costa Rican whites, but included indigenous groups, North American and European expatriates and missionaries and a quickly growing but exclusive society of Chinese immigrant entrepreneurs. The distinct cultural worldview that each ethnic group struggled to maintain in the face of increasing social uncertainty dissolved with each

successive generation. Few now verbalise an ethnically situated cultural identity that is not tied to a nostalgic image that may or may not have been part of their immediate experience. The glory of Afro-Costa Rican life, or that of Costa Rican whites in Limón is often framed in the terms of the 'good old days' with the obligatory references to the cultural emptiness of modern Limón life.

The old lemon tree has long been replaced by the municipal government building, though few would admit of any similar sentimental attachment to that institution. But in some ways it is a fitting symbol for the twists and turns of Limón's social and political development. There is a constant conflict between the nostalgia of self-reliance and the modern dependence on the white Costa Rican government. What remains important about the legend quoted at the beginning of this introduction is the sense of Puerto Limón as the locus of an emotional attachment to the region. Limonenses still contextualise their cultural lives in relation to the city, though history has witnessed more than one group of 'men in suits' come to lay claim to the economic fruit of the port. By constantly bringing the past to bear on the present, Limonenses maintain a sense of continuity with their sense of place that continues to keep complete assimilation at bay.

As such, Limón is a region that simply does not fit with the rest of Costa Rica. It is the 'black' province; the 'Africanised' Atlantic coast. These sentiments come from outside and inside Limón. They vary from a negative view of Limón as irredeemably backward to a positive valorisation of 'black' and 'African' as the keys to collective identity. Both perspectives seek a discursive fix on the ethnic melange of Limón, hoping to pin down its future in light of its past. Both perspectives grow out of an increasing despondency over the perceived cultural deterioration of the city and the region.

Still, as locals mourn the loss of old wooden stilt homes that once dotted the Afro-

Costa Rican communities with pale blues, pinks, and greens, the concrete monoliths that replace them bare their own expressive flourishes of colour and elaborate iron work. As locals, and outsiders, decry the cultural vacuum that consumes Limón, an informal community of painters brings to life a vision of Limón on canvas that not only incorporates Afro-Costa Ricans and white Costa Ricans, but exports that vision to galleries throughout Costa Rica, the US and Europe. As locals mourn the deterioration of *Carnaval* into just another drunken festival, *comparsas*, large street bands of dancers, singers and musicians, display all the complexity of Limón cultural life in a dynamic and uniquely Limonense performance. As locals mourn the loss of the old story tellers, Limonense literary figures continue to write some of the most powerful and endearing works to come out of Costa Rica.

The pattern indicates a gap in perception between an historically situated ideological concept of Limonense identity, still stuck in its ethnic isolationism, and the everyday lived experience of a burgeoning new collective identity played out in the construction of an overarching cultural aesthetic system that incorporates the many disparate influences on Limón into a cohesive yet malleable whole.

This thesis explores the dynamics of this transformative process at work in Puerto Limón. The task of the pages to follow is to analyse and write about the intuitive phenomena of cultural life that slips in and out of the discursive ideal in collective meaning. In short, I intend to wed the ideal with the real in the construction of identity through an analysis of the aesthetic system particular to Puerto Limón. This endeavour is predicated on the notion of aesthetics as a cross-cultural process of value attachment which, like identity, is the product of the dialectical relationship between the discursive realm of conceptual meaning and the non-discursive realm of lived experience.

Brief Review of Literature

The rather complex social environment of Puerto Limón proves a rich ethnographic field site, though it has not suffered the extensive analysis of other similar regions in Latin America. Those who have undertaken some form of research in the city or the province have decried the lack of research carried out in the richly diverse region (see Purcell 1993; Echeverri-Gent 1992; Koch 1977). Nor is it due to the lack of economic potential; Puerto Limón remains one of Costa Rica's most important shipping centres and its land is some of the most fertile in Central America. It seems that for Latin Americans Limón is a bit too much Caribbean, and for Caribbeanists it is just a bit too much Latin American.

The people of Limón are not completely without champions. Aside from some notice in journal articles (Echeverri-Gent 1992; Chi & Griffin 1980), human rights publications (Royal & Perry 1996), and the occasional unpublished post-graduate thesis (Hughes 1993; Koch 1977; Moock 1972; Bryce-Laporte 1962), extensive social and historical work has been carried out by five scholars in particular: Duncan and Melendez (1972); Philippe Bourgois (1989); Harry Lefever (1992); and Trevor Purcell (1993).

The first book-length study of Limón that focused specifically on Afro-Costa Rican experience was *El Negro en Costa Rica* by Quince Duncan and Carlos Melendez. Melendez, a white Costa Rican, and Duncan, a Limón born Afro-Costa Rican, examine the state of ethnic and racial interaction in an historical perspective. Their work, completed in the 1970s, offers a broad historical account, as well as an insightful analysis of local perspectives of social equality. Their volume includes excerpts from Marcus Garvey as well as difficult to obtain academic papers translated into Spanish.

Philippe Bourgois, in his *Ethnicity at Work*, examines the historical development of the plantation system in Limón province, and conducts an in-depth investigation on an active plantation that straddles the border between Costa Rica and Panama. As an Anglo-American, Bourgois has access to plantation management personnel, which is still predominantly white, and is able to examine the manipulation of ethnic divisions throughout the history of the plantation. Bourgois is concerned with including a material reality to ideological positions among the people who work the plantations, and with examining ethnicity as an historical construct that is tied to class. Though his work does not deal specifically with Puerto Limón, Bourgois offers valuable insight into the nature of ethnicity as socially constructed yet in every way 'real' in the sense of its ability to organise and mobilise action.

Harry Lefever's *Turtle Bogue* examines the construction of social history in a small village on the Caribbean coast of Costa Rican near Nicaragua. Though, like Bourgois' work, the setting is far removed from the urban environment of Puerto Limón, Lefever's account of rural life in the province offers a counterpoint to developments in the city. Specifically, Lefever is interested in the play of cultural forms in a region that seems brimming with displaced inhabitants, and offers an important view into the construction of history and identity.

Finally, Trevor Purcell (1993), a Jamaican-born anthropologist, focuses his research on race, ethnicity, and the role of the West in the province of Limón. His research covers three communities, one urban (Puerto Limón), one rural, and one town in transition. As such, Purcell is one of the few researchers to focus specifically on the urban environment of Puerto Limón. Purcell examines the racial and ethnic hierarchy apparent in the province of Limón in contrast to the dominant ideology of equality. This

examination is placed in context with the historical development of the region and how Western, namely North American and British, influences have affected Afro-Costa Rican society.

Much of Purcell's argument rests on his formulation of value transaction. According to Purcell, members of society participate in value transaction as they negotiate and manipulate 'values, ideas and symbols - both from the dominant sector and from their own cultural group - according to the demands of their social and historical environment, including the power relations they encounter' (Purcell 1993:15). He sees the negotiation of identity in Limón as necessarily incorporating the surrounding influences, including the values held by the dominant sector. He evaluates the various results of this process of transaction in light of a preconceived notion of pan-Caribbean blackness elaborated more fully in the works of Paul Gilroy (1993) and in Chapter Four of this thesis. According to Purcell, the value transaction at work is from an ideology of solidarity, similar to Peter Wilson's 'reputation' (Wilson 1973) and still found in rural areas of Limón, toward an ideology of equality which 'explicitly promotes upward mobility, but implicitly imposes arbitrary limits on it' (Purcell 1993:87).

The insight of Purcell's notion of value transaction adds much to an understanding of cultural transformation in Limón. What Purcell's formulation lacks, however, is an ability to recognise the gradual formation of an ideological solidarity that is not based on racial categories. Race is only one aspect of a much more complex socio-cultural dynamic that cannot be reduced to the negotiation of power between two distinct categories. Purcell's value transaction can perhaps best be seen in relation to an aesthetic system which creatively adapts such ideological constructs as race into Limonense lived

experience. This would bring Purcell's notion closer to Bourgois' joining of ideology and material reality in his work on ethnicity in Limón.

Aesthetics, in its purest sense, refers simply to the attachment of value to the expression or perception of experience, and as such communicates a shared way of knowing the world. Aesthetic expression 'confers on what it expresses an existence in itself, installs it in nature as a thing perceived and accessible to all' (Merleau-Ponty 1989[1962]:183). This simple yet powerful role of aesthetics makes abstract ideal concepts experientially real, offering a material reality to conceptual ideology. But more than a handmaiden to ideology, aesthetics is an evaluative system of perception and expression that leads an important double life: both as the legitimating apparatus for a conceptual ideology; and as the forum in which lived experience may undermine that same ideology. Individuals contextualise all experience in the phenomenological *Lebenswelt*, or lifeworld, rather than the rarefied intellectual environment that alone can sustain ideological concepts (see Merleau-Ponty 1989 and Bernet et. al. 1993). The inevitable gap between intentional meaning and perceived experience generates a productive conflict, a dialectic mediated by aesthetic practice, that moves individuals through the perpetual process of identity formation.

Drawing on the theoretical achievements of pragmatist philosophy and phenomenology, this research offers an ethnographic analysis of aesthetic experience in the complex and fragile cultural context of Puerto Limón, Costa Rica. More than a cataloguing of aesthetic practice, the analysis will demonstrate how the abstract concepts of aesthetic theory apply to the lived experience of Limonenses and the cultural process of identity formation at work in their city.

Methodology

The bulk of the ethnographic data that informs this thesis is based on twelve months of field research in the city of Puerto Limón from June 1997 to June 1998. In the course of the year I also spent time on the southern coast of Limón province, in the capital city of San José and the old capital of Cartago in the highland Central Valley, as well as various parts of the Pacific coast. In terms of the specific research methods employed, I relied predominantly on participant/observation and a city-wide household survey.

I was fortunate enough to live in barrio Roosevelt during my time in Limón. As one of the oldest barrios in the city originally established by the transnational fruit companies, its population consists mostly of Afro-Costa Ricans. I was also fortunate to rent a room from one of the oldest and best connected families in the barrio. This provided unexpectedly open access to informants throughout the city.

Once established within the community, the research focused on piecing together a broad picture of Limonense aesthetics in its various expressive manifestations. This involved participation in various formal and informal organisations and institutions, but, as I would soon discover, much of Limonense aesthetic activity takes place on the streets and in the homes of the city. This required simply 'being there' day in and day out. The objective was to construct the expressive world of the community in its respective context.

Having outlined various forms through which a cultural aesthetic is expressed, analysis focused on how those forms developed historically and how they are changing in contemporary Limón. This involved archival research in San José as well as a more

structured schedule of interviews in Puerto Limón and in the Central Valley around San José.

My approach to data gathering among various informants consisted of informal interviews followed by more formal taped interviews in both Spanish and English[2]. The particular socio-political environment of Puerto Limón left most at ease with taped interviews. This is due in part to the history of blackness as a latent social movement combined with the typically invoked 'racial democracy'. Inevitably many Afro-Costa Ricans were eager to talk about black experience while many white Costa Ricans were as eager to deny it as a discrete category of experience. The net result was that I encountered very few who admitted of any discomfort around a tape recorder, much less a pen and notebook.

In the spirit of participant/observation I involved myself as much as possible into the milieu of aesthetic perception, if not expression. This often meant travelling around the country with one of the comparsa street bands, spending time in night-clubs listening to live Limón calypso, or working with local artists to procure materials. Through these experiences I was able to get an integrated view of aesthetic context unavailable through structured interviews. Fortunately, I was often invited into these experiences and rarely had to insinuate myself as 'the ethnographer'.

To provide a statistical backdrop to these more intuitive, qualitative methods, I also undertook a city-wide survey of 250 households. The survey, discussed in Chapter Four and the Appendix, was an attempt to fill in the blanks of previous research in terms of ethnicity, migration and marriage patterns, as well as specific perceptions of how race intersects with urban space. Originally conceived as a random sample of 250 households in 5 randomly chosen barrios, the survey design was modified to accommodate the highly

structured pattern of inequality among barrios. Working with Limonenses, we divided barrios according to three categories: affluent, 'safe' barrios; poorer, 'dangerous' barrios; and squatter settlements. To achieve a balanced and representative sample, two barrios were randomly selected from each of the first two categories and one from among the squatter settlements. This roughly mirrored the distribution of barrios in all three categories. Households were then randomly selected within each of the selected barrios. An important by-product of this exercise was my own orientation to the layout of the city and the early establishment of contacts outside my immediate residence.

The Structure of the Analysis

The end result, after twelve months of data collection in the field, was an unwieldy wealth of information. In order to convey the integrated nature of the Limonense aesthetic system in the space and time allowed for a doctoral thesis, I was forced to narrow down the focus of the research to include a few specific expressive forms. This decision was based on what I perceived to be most important to Limonenses, but inevitably the exclusion of some practices such as food and worship style felt arbitrary indeed. I attempt to balance this by incorporating aspects of these other, undoubtedly important forms throughout the analysis to follow, though, unfortunately, they do not enjoy a dedicated chapter.

The chapters to follow are divided into two parts. The first part introduces the theoretical and ethnographic foundation of the research. The second part discusses four categories of expressive forms through which Limonenses work out their cultural identity.

Chapter One introduces some of the basic theoretical concepts used in the analysis of aesthetics and identity in general. I argue for the development of a cross-cultural, phenomenological concept of aesthetics based on the daily practice of creative expression as opposed to Kant's focus on perception and disinterested appreciation. The argument systematically presents aesthetics as a socially constructed phenomenological category of experience which liberates the concept from its Kantian constraints, returns it to its Greek roots, and makes it tenable as a cross-cultural concept based on everyday experience and the practice of expression. I then argue for a definition of aesthetic expression as the re-creation of experience through which values are re-constituted and/or transformed. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how an everyday aesthetic participates in the construction of cultural identity through the interplay of ideology and experience.

Chapter Two explores the ethnographic context of Puerto Limón, providing both an historical background and an introduction to the contemporary setting. The chapter begins with a history of Limón from the earliest inhabitants of the region, and chronicles the arrival of Afro-Caribbeans that began with Columbus in 1502. The history focuses on the menage of ethnic groups that characterised Limón especially after the immigration of thousands of Afro-Caribbeans in search of work at the start of this century. With the proper historical perspective, the chapter introduces the contemporary context. This includes the peculiar situation of Puerto Limón as an 'ethnic' city, the position of smaller ethnic groups in relation to the dominant black/white opposition, and the mediating category of gender in the process of identity formation.

The final chapter of Part I deals specifically and in-depth with the concept of blackness in Latin America and, more importantly, in Puerto Limón. As much of the Afro-Costa Rican population in Limón trace their roots to the insular Caribbean, the

discussion of blackness as a category of experience in social science literature begins in the islands. This is followed by a review of some important work in mainland Latin America concerning the development of blackness as a focus of socio-political consciousness among Afro-Latin Americans. The review explores some of the regional differentiation in the various articulations of blackness as a collective identity, and offers some clues as to the historical reasons behind these differences. All of this is brought to bear on the particular case of Puerto Limón. Through an analysis of the Universal Negro Improvement Association's Negro Day celebration and the annual Limón *Carnaval*, the chapter demonstrates how blackness as a consciously implemented ideology of black identity undergoes an experiential transformation to become a more inclusive, amalgamated notion of collective Limonense identity.

Part II delves into the particularity of Limonense expressive forms. The general discussion of aesthetic theory of Chapter One and the ethnographic contextualisation of Chapters Two and Three are intended as an extended introduction to the analysis of the Limonense aesthetic system through four specific expressive forms: the built environment; the plastic arts; music and performance; and literature. As stated above, these categorical divisions obscure the integrated nature of Limón aesthetics, but this illustrates one of the great difficulties in the anthropology of aesthetics; how to write about phenomena that are intuitive and in many ways non-discursive. For the purposes of this thesis, the divisions are an analytical fiction to help clarify the inner-workings of the aesthetic system and ultimately demonstrate how each form is intimately connected with the others.

The first chapter of Part II deals with the broad subject of space and place in and out of Limón. The first section of this chapter discusses the socialisation of space and

place in both the national and the local contexts. The racialisation of Limón province by Costa Rican outsiders discussed throughout the previous chapters is dealt with in more detail here. This same phenomenon is examined on the local inter-barrio level, with special attention to how space is associated with perceptions of danger. The second section of this chapter is concerned with conceptual boundaries (or lack thereof) between the domestic and the urban built environment of Limón. A case is made for the two realms blending into one another, where the home becomes urbanised and the street becomes domesticated.

Chapter Five examines the plastic arts in Limón, focusing primarily on a community of canvas artists. Lead by a patriarchal figure named Negrín, the canvas artists construct a symbolic ethnicity through a collective style which reflects important aspects of the ideology of blackness. Four issues surrounding the expressive form are examined in detail: the resistance to individuality; the tendency toward a collective style; the idolatry of abstraction; and the emphasis on the Afro-Caribbean past. I argue that while the community of artists participate in constructing an ideal notion of Limonense identity, the power of experience interacts with the material reality of the form to diffuse the influence of that ideal. The all-male community of canvas artists is compared and contrasted with a predominately female organisation of artisans. The notion of art versus craft is examined in detail, especially how the particular context of Limón rests on gender, knowledge and power. In conclusion, I argue for the two-fold influence of the plastic arts in Limón. First, the ideological nature of the graphic arts participates in the discursive concept of an ideal Limón. Second, the phenomenological nature of everyday interaction with art undermines the power of that discursive concept to produce a more appropriately flexible notion of Limonense identity.

In Chapter Six I examine three types of musical performance in Puerto Limón: calypso bands, school bands, and comparsas. Calypso bands communicate the same conceptual nostalgia that characterises Limón canvas art, linking present experience with collective memory in a way that is inherently conceptual but also susceptible to phenomenological transformation. Limón school bands demonstrate the development of a unique Limonense performative style that builds on the traditions of calypso by adding other ethnic influences. The school bands socialise Limón youth into their inevitable link to the national socio-political context of Costa Rica even as they embody the cultural differences that have long justified a *de facto* exclusion from that context. Finally, the Limón comparsa establishes itself as the quintessential Limón musical form, and offers an aesthetic model for a collective Limonense identity. Growing out of the annual celebration of Carnaval, the Limón comparsa illustrates the power of experience to inform the process of identity formation. As such, the Limón comparsa carries the cultural role of school bands a step further, embodying the flexibility and spontaneity that constitutes Limonense experience.

Chapter Seven examines the substantial body of literature to come out of the province of Limón, and the split between male-authored prose and female rhymed verse. The male-authored prose literature is examined in detail both from the perspective of outsiders writing about Limón, and Limonenses writing about themselves. The analysis traces the literary construction of gender, and draws some conclusions as to the origin of the female poet/male novelist split. This leads into an analysis of poetry as both a literary and a performative form. The issues surrounding gender and power are examined in light of the legitimacy/authenticity dualism discussed in other contexts. The chapter then

presents women's poetry in Limón as a source of resistance linked to the overarching process of identity formation.

The thesis concludes by way of an extended narrative which rephrases some of the more salient issues discussed throughout the thesis, but refrains from making closed-ended conclusions. The epilogue also problematises the discursive quality of ethnographic writing in pursuit of non-discursive experience and suggests ways this kind of research and analysis could be carried further in the future.

Notes

[1] The problem of nomenclature for the various ethnic groups in Puerto Limón has plagued almost every writer on this area. There are almost as many variations as there have been articles and books published. My use of Afro-Costa Rican and white Costa Rican is to a certain extent arbitrary in the interest of consistency, but it is also linked to the way locals enact their ethnic identification. Light skinned highland Costa Ricans refer to themselves as *blancos* [whites], evoking their socio-historical associations with Europe and long history of political isolationism from the rest of *mestizo* Central America. Darker skinned Limonenses refer to themselves and are referred to by outsiders as *negros* [blacks] and less often *Afro-Costarricenses*, *Africaribenos*, or *Afro-Limonenses*. My use of Afro-Costa Rican is to highlight the socio-historically constructed nature of ethnic identification and to throw the more commonly used *negro* into relief against the backdrop of locally and nationally constructed racial essentialisms.

[2] Throughout the thesis, 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. Secondary sources originally in Spanish can be found in the list of references.

PART I

CHAPTER ONE

IDENTITY AND AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE:

An Anthropological Approach

'The place doesn't matter. What's important is what you are painting'.

William spoke between long drags from his cigarette. He sat in a wire chair perched precariously over the narrow gutter that divided his front stoop from the street.

He thought for a moment, then contradicted himself, 'When a painter begins to work he needs to close himself off from the world. He has the inspiration, then he needs solitude'.

Two neighbours hailed him as they passed and William shouted back. He laughed to himself at their private joke and turned back to me.

'Once he has finished he can return to life. He has to get out of his routine and get inside of his art. There is perhaps more inspiration in solitude than when you have people all around you in the street distracting you'.

William flicked his cigarette to the pavement. It tumbled among the other used stubs where he sets his easel every day. From inside, his wife called him in to lunch, one of his children wailed, and another neighbour hailed him from the street.

Before he heaved himself from the chair he added, 'One needs solitude'.

Stumbling upon a group of canvas artists in Limón precipitated a crisis in my approach to the concept of aesthetics. Seeking that aesthetic of everyday, 'mundane' activity in the gritty urban environment of Puerto Limón, I found myself immersed in an art world not entirely dissimilar to that found in New York or London. I was forced to question categorical distinctions between art and craft, form and function, Western and non-Western.

Like any crisis, it was fraught with anxiety but also opportunity. I began to see that the ways in which canvas art in Limón did differ from the First World institution of fine art were the keys to understanding how the form fit into the aesthetic milieu of the

built environment, performance and literature. I began to see how that milieu operated in a system of valuation that subsumed issues of race, ethnicity, gender and nationalism to produce a flexible, contingent identity operating simultaneously on several different levels. As my own abstract theoretical position was transformed by the corrective of field experience, the dynamics of that process became the model for my analysis of the Limón material.

This chapter offers an outline of my theoretical approach to aesthetics as informed by the ethnographic material to follow[1]. As the first chapter, it serves as a blueprint to my argument, though methodologically it came after I waded through the ethnographic data. The intention is to cue the reader to the complex socio-cultural etymology of aesthetics, unpack its 'Western' biases, and reconnect its analytical power to the everyday lives of everyday people.

Toward An Anthropology of Aesthetics

Within any culture there is a relativised concept of beauty, or cultural aesthetic, that has less to do with disinterested judgements of taste or technique, than with historical, moral, social, environmental, and spiritual components of a shared response to the world; that is to say, a culturally specific way of sensory perception and expression. The concept of beauty rests not on stylistic universals, but upon socialisation. A cultural aesthetic system refers to how a specific culture perceives the surrounding world, and how it expresses that perception in ways that appeal to the culturally oriented senses.

Despite the growing number of anthropologists who recognise the usefulness of aesthetics in cultural analysis (Forrest 1988; Guss 1989; Morphy 1991; Coote and Shelton

1992), aesthetics, especially as it pertains to everyday existence, seldom appears in social analysis. Its common association with subjective, qualitative sense-activity removed from collective, observable cognitive processes has unnecessarily excluded it from social scientific inquiry. This position ignores the phenomenological aspect of aesthetic experience in favour of a rigid Kantian view of aesthetics as disinterested appreciation.

This thesis critiques the Kantian foundation of contemporary Western aesthetics and seeks to establish an anthropological model for aesthetic systems which reorients readers to a more generalisable connotation of aesthetics. The theoretical foundations for this concept are two-fold: aesthetic perception is the attachment of values to experience; and aesthetic expression is the re-creation of experience through which those values are reconstituted and/or transformed.

The concept of aesthetic *perception* incorporates a cognitive process in what has largely been written of as the qualitative/emotional response to experience. It also offers a critique of the universal application of the Western, and more specifically leisure class, concept of aesthetics as an attitude of disinterested appreciation, placing such a concept in its proper context as one of a number of different aesthetic systems constructed around the world.

The concept of aesthetic *expression* incorporates the active, processual aspects of creative expression into an analytical framework that has focused predominantly on isolated expressive products, or 'art objects'. This formulation of creative expression redresses the Western dichotomisation of art and craft as well as artists and artisans, thereby situating expression in the dynamic of an aesthetic system that is both generalisable and culturally specific.

Working within this theoretical paradigm, the thesis also examines the connections between aesthetics and the cultural process of identity formation. This position argues that both identity and aesthetics are cross-cultural processes of value attachment that are founded on the dialectical relationship between the discursive realm of conceptual meaning and the non-discursive realm of lived experience.

Redefining Aesthetic Perception

Aesthetic perception is the attachment of value to the sensory experience of objects or events. This notion of aesthetic perception is derived from Baumgarten's (1954[1735]) formulation of the Greek concept and Kant's first critique (1969[1787]), both of which refer to the cognitive process of qualitative sensory perception. The concept here refers to a cross-cultural system of value attachment that involves both form and function.

Alexander Baumgarten's original use of the term *aestheticae* referred to 'the science of perception', that is, 'the science which might direct the lower cognitive faculty in knowing things sensately' (Baumgarten 1954:78). Baumgarten formulated aesthetics as a complement to philosophy which was concerned with things known intellectually, and therefore removed from the senses. The importance of the 'lower cognitive faculty' of the senses and their effects led Baumgarten to stress the importance of aesthetics in a philosophical pursuit of truth.

But long before Baumgarten's sought some place for aesthetics in philosophy, the Greeks drove the spikes of division. It was Plato, writing in the fourth century BC, who firmly established the hierarchical distinction between abstract conceptual thought and the sensory perception of the material world. Plato, building on the 'long-standing

quarrel between poetry and philosophy' (Plato 1941:33), argued that the creative arts relied too much on the emotions, polluting the purity of intellectual reason. According to Plato, the poet, or any creative artist, only works when he is 'out of his senses, and the mind is no longer in him' (Plato 1987:51). He argued that all creative arts are 'the third remove from reality, nothing more than semblances, easy to produce, with no knowledge of the truth' (Plato 1941:321). It is thus that Plato calls for the banishment of tragic and comic poetry, pan-harmonious music, and all kinds of painting and sculpture from his ideal, and sows the seeds of exclusion that would bloom in Descartes' separation of mind and body in the idolisation of rational objectivity in scientific method.

In spite of Plato's struggle to exclude the creative arts from philosophical thought, his student, Aristotle, took up the theme throughout his work. It is in the writing of Aristotle that we see the complementary and corrective completion of what Plato began and would eventually become the foundation of Western aesthetics. Aristotle disagreed with Plato as to the philosophical potential of poetry and the creative arts: 'Poetry is something more philosophic and of graver import than history, since its statements are of the nature rather of universals; whereas those of history are singulars' (Aristotle 1987:77). And though Aristotle agreed with Plato that the creative arts were imitations of reality, he argued that it was precisely this aspect that made them philosophical. For 'imitation is natural to man from childhood . . . [He] learns at first by imitation . . . [and] to be learning something is the greatest of pleasures' (Aristotle 1987:71). In the same breath Aristotle reveals his alignment with Plato in the social hierarchy of philosophy and art when he writes that learning by imitation gives pleasure 'not only to the philosopher, but also to the rest of mankind, however small their capacity for it' (Aristotle 1987:71).

The most important legacy of Aristotle and Plato to the aesthetics of Western civilisation may be summarised in Aristotle's statement: 'All art is concerned with . . . how something may come into being . . . whose origin is in the maker and not in the thing made; for art is concerned neither with things that are, or come into being, by necessity, nor with things that do so in accordance with nature (since these have their origin in themselves)' (Aristotle 1954:141). Encapsulated in this statement are two fundamental tenets of contemporary Western aesthetics: the authorial autonomy of the contemporary artist creating 'like unto God' and the disinterested appreciation of Kant who excluded any claims of necessity or utility in the realm of art.

The philosophical attitude toward art and its production established by Plato and Aristotle remained in place for the better part of two millennia. Their legacy set the tone for philosophical inquiry (or lack thereof) into art, aesthetics and sensory experience in general. It was not until Baumgarten, and later, Immanuel Kant, that the concept of art or aesthetics entered the mainstream of philosophical thought.

Baumgarten's use of aesthetics built upon this Greek concept which referred to the apprehension of the material world as distinct from things which were immaterial or which could only be thought. This does not exclude sensory perception from the cognitive faculties, it in fact depends upon them to make sense of apprehension. Kant, somewhat circuitously, draws this conclusion from the outset of *Critique of Pure Reason.* Kant defines 'intuition', or sensibility, as the way in which knowledge relates to objects in their immediacy. Concepts arise from thought and all thought is in some way related to intuition (Kant 1969:41). In this way, cognition is intimately related to the experience of intuition. Mills neatly illustrates the relationship between qualitative sensory perception and cognition: 'Experience is like a river, one bank of which is cognitive, the

other qualitative. It is as incorrect to speak of a cognitive experience or a qualitative experience as it is to speak of a river with one bank' (Mills 1971:85-86). There can be no qualitative sensory perception if the cognitive faculties of the mind do not attach some value to the experience.

Aesthetic perception in this cognitive/qualitative sense is universal, though qualitative responses to objects and events are necessarily coloured by the given social environment. Depending on the context, an aesthetic response may be elicited by 'the perfect functional utility of a chair, the simplicity of an idea, or the elegance of a solution to a problem' (Morphy 1992:181). This universal yet culturally variable quality makes an aesthetic system particularly useful as an anthropological model of social organisation and identity formation.

Immanuel Kant, in his third critique, *Critique of Judgement* (1987[1790]), constructs one of the earliest and most insightful characterisations of a culturally specific aesthetic system. According to Kant's revision of his own aesthetic philosophy, all aesthetic judgements are subjective and allied to the immediacy of the imagination, as opposed to logical judgements which are objective and allied to a mediating cognition: 'The judgement of taste is therefore not a judgement of cognition, and is consequently not logical but aesthetical, by which we understand that whose determining ground can be *no other than subjective*' (Kant 1987:103). As an unmediated perception, an aesthetic judgement must be disassociated with any functional or utilitarian quality. Otherwise the perception would conjure up a concept which involves cognition which would render the judgement mediated, logical, and thoroughly un-aesthetical in Kant's formulation: 'the judgement of taste is merely *contemplative*; i.e., it is a judgement which [is] indifferent as

regards the existence of an object. . . . But this contemplation itself is not directed to concepts; for the judgement of taste is not a cognitive judgement' (Kant 1987:108).

This concept of disinterested appreciation was based on the Cartesian revolution of scientific method carried to its logical conclusion. For Descartes, and Kant, being was rooted in contemplation which in turn was rooted in the disembodied mind. Sensory experience, as it relied on the mediation of the body, was inherently unreliable, requiring the corrective of pure contemplation. As a result, the extraction of the object of contemplation from any association with its relationship to the body (i.e., its usefulness in everyday life or as a material means to an end) was central to the Kantian concept of aesthetics as it applied to the judgement of taste.

While Kant brought the term aesthetics back into the realm of philosophical contemplation, it was in a new and much more narrow formulation than that of the Greeks. In Kant's redemption of aesthetics from the Platonic disavowal of its inherently emotional quality, the term came to be inextricably associated with disinterestedness and elitism. This use of aesthetics refers to Western elite society, and as far as it goes, is a helpful analysis of one cultural response to an aesthetic system. Unfortunately, this culturally specific conception of aesthetic perception has been used to justify the inapplicable nature of 'aesthetics' in any context outside of the West (Ingold 1996; Gell 1995). The argument hinges on two misconceptions concerning aesthetics partly derived from Kant's third critique, namely the critical use of judgement as uniquely Western and the value of function over form as uniquely non-Western.

The notion of judgement as a uniquely Western qualifier of artistic achievement excludes the possibility of a comparable use of aesthetic judgement in a non-Western context. The obvious argument against such a notion is the strikingly similar concept of

aesthetic judgement found in large-scale, socially stratified societies of Asia. This hints at what will be discussed below as Kant's position as an intellectual elite within a stratified State society and the problem with considering his perspective universal. For the moment, the intention is to illustrate the use of judgement in various non-Western contexts, where non-Western refers to small-scale, non-State societies.

The typical argument against aesthetics as a cross-cultural category lies in the notion of non-Western expressive forms as intimately bound to everyday cultural activity where every member is an 'artist' and no cultural products are judged in their own right as 'beautiful' or 'ugly' (Ingold 1996). A well-documented example of the use of aesthetic judgement in a non-Western setting is provided by Harry R. Silver for the Asante (Ashanti) of Ghana and their carvings. Silver (1979) describes the growing Asante carving market as largely due to the thriving tourist industry. The Asante carve for a Western market, and maintaining a hierarchy of craftsmanship, make aesthetic decisions based on that market which are comparable to a Western concept of aesthetic judgement. Beyond that, the carvers themselves do not view every object produced as beautiful. The Asante have certain criteria by which they 'judge' aesthetic expression. Styles that have been borrowed from other cultural traditions to meet the demand of tourists are judged to be 'conceptually incomprehensible, unspeakably ugly, and occasionally downright frightening' (Silver 1979:200). Carvings which reflect the 'real Asante' are 'judged' to be better than just any artistic creation. The Asante distaste for styles appreciated by the Western consumers demonstrates an indigenous aesthetic which is different from that of the West, but comparable in its use of judgement as a qualification of beauty.

Another example of aesthetic judgement in a non-Western setting may be found among the Yolngu bark-painters of north-east Arnhem Land, Australia, as documented by Howard Morphy (1991). Though the aesthetic aspects of what is produced by the Yolngu serve an important function (and in some cases are rarely even meant to be displayed), the success of an 'artist' depends upon the aesthetic judgement of those around him or her. Morphy describes one instance where a Yolngu bark painting was rejected by some men of the Djinang moiety who were watching the progress of its production. According to Morphy, 'the reason for this rejection was explicit: the figure looked too much like a crocodile, a Yirritja moiety species' (Morphy 1991:158). The technical mastery of the painter was not sufficient to accurately portray the correct Djinang moiety species of lizard, and so the painting was rejected.

The above examples focus upon a non-Western use of aesthetic judgement in the attachment of value to objects. But are not these examples all focused on the evaluation of beauty in terms of its social or spiritual utility, and not on beauty as such? Does that not prove that function over form is uniquely non-Western? Are there no examples of non-Western groups performing the same Western process of attaching value to an object or event for its own sake? The answers to these questions are debatable, but so are the underlying assumptions that prompt their asking. As the above ethnographic examples imply, within non-Western contexts, concepts of beauty rarely have to do with the disinterestedness of Kantian appreciation, but relate directly to social or ritual practices. The success of an artist in a non-Western context often depends less on the creative use of a particular medium than on their ability to effectively reflect the cultural world view. Thus, for most non-Western people, the concept of beauty is inextricably associated with its social or spiritual utility. However, beauty 'as such' is rarely detached from function

even in a Western context. Not only is the non-Western appreciation of beauty in utility valid as an aesthetic response, it is in many ways similar to Western aesthetic appreciation which is not so much disinterested in functional aspects of an art object as it is interested in how its evaluation will be received in society. This analysis must now turn to examining the proposition that the value of function over form is limited to non-Western societies.

Pierre Bourdieu undermines the applicability of Kant's view of aesthetics in *Distinction* (1984), his oft-referred-to work concerning taste and class distinction in French society. Bourdieu demonstrates that disinterested appreciation is neither universal nor even wholly Western, but a product of an elite class accustomed to disposable time and resources. For Bourdieu, the working classes of Western, or any stratified, State society regard every thing in terms of its function, and yet are still able to discern beauty. Bourdieu writes: 'detachment, disinterestedness, indifference - aesthetic theory has so often presented these as the only way to recognise the work of art for what it is . . . that one ends up forgetting that they really mean dis-investment, detachment, indifference, in other words, the refusal to invest oneself and take things seriously' (Bourdieu 1984:34). For those unaccustomed to disposable time and resources, survival is not taken for granted, and every word, thought, or deed requires an investment of oneself. This investment or attachment does not discount aesthetic perception, indeed it points to an alternate aesthetic system constructed by the working class which attaches value to objects and events in a fundamentally different manner than that of the elite class. In the context of French society there are at least two aesthetic systems operating side-by-side, mutually exclusive in their attachment of value, but both valid as a way of knowing the surrounding world.

The Kantian concept of disinterested appreciation where utilitarian contemplation spoils the aesthetic experience is not found in small-scale non-State societies outside of the West; nor, according to Bourdieu, is it found in certain class distinctions within the West. The Kantian aesthetic seems therefore limited to an elite class within large-scale State societies, which explains its appearance in Asian societies. Kant's critique of judgement, and the aesthetic experience that prompts it, is a product of his own experience within an intellectual elite, and not unlike much of European philosophy has been accorded a certain universal currency. However, the limited applicability of Kant's term does not deter the argument that the 'aesthetic' still refers to Kant's conception of disinterestedness and therefore cannot apply cross-culturally, or apparently, across classes. This argument may have merit only insofar as Kant's concept of disinterested appreciation applies within any class or culture.

There are, however, non-Western cases in which 'Western' dispositions may be seen to exist. The cattle-keeping Nilotes of the Southern Sudan offer a helpful illustration. In reference to the Dinka, Jeremy Coote describes a common dilemma for the owner of cattle: whether to keep a well-marked calf for stud purposes or to castrate it for display (Coote 1992:252). This marks a critical conflict between form and function in a non-Western context. The Dinka here are operating an aesthetic distinction, comparable to that found in the West, between what is beautiful and what is functional. The salient point here is that objects set apart purely for visual appreciation is a category familiar to both the Dinka and Western art collectors.

In his critique of Coote's essay, Alfred Gell convincingly argues that Dinka youth are more concerned with the social distinction accorded them through owning well-marked cattle than with any intrinsic beauty associated with certain configurations of

black and white markings (Gell 1995:23-24). In this sense, what appears to be the disinterested appreciation of a well-marked calf, which prompts its display, is in reality another example of a non-Western inability to separate form from function. No doubt Gell's argument is grounded in Bourdieu's discussion in *Distinction*, not to mention everyday observations of art as a social marker within elite Western society.

A thorough examination of this elite Western use of taste in society is found in Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1994[1899]). If Kant's aesthetic exists in any context, it surely exists here. Veblen describes all activity of the elite in industrial society as centred around pecuniary emulation, that is the continual increase of wealth relative to others within the elite class. Honour is accorded when accumulated wealth renders labour and efficient consumption unnecessary, thus leisure and wastefulness become the marks of elite social status. In this context there is a socially constructed notion of the beautiful as that which marks wealth and leisure. In other words, beautiful objects 'are wasteful and ill adapted to their ostensible use' (Veblen 1994:78). As in Kant's formulation, the leisure class perceives beauty in objects removed from the context of their practical use.

Veblen uses as an example the contemplation of two spoons, one hand-wrought from silver, the other machine-made from aluminium, to illustrate the leisure class aesthetic. The hand-wrought spoon would provide more aesthetic gratification than the common, machine-made spoon because the former is much more expensive and involves a far more complex production process without any appreciable increase in serviceability. However, 'if a closer inspection should show that the supposed hand-wrought spoon were in reality only a clever imitation of hand-wrought goods, but an imitation so cleverly wrought as to give the same impression of line and surface . . . the gratification which the

user derives from its contemplation as an object of beauty would immediately decline' (Veblen 1994:78). The imitation spoon, being more cheaply made and easier to acquire, loses value as a beautiful object because it is more practical than a truly hand-wrought spoon. In as much as it is more practical it is less wasteful and therefore less valued as beautiful by a member of the leisure class. The qualitative evaluation of the spoon as beautiful depends upon its appreciation apart from practical use not because of some notion of 'purity' in aesthetic judgement, but because the maintenance of class status depends upon conspicuous waste and abstention from labour which are the conventional marks of social standing within the leisure class. Veblen explains: 'the requirement of conspicuous wastefulness is . . . a constraining norm selectively shaping and sustaining our sense of what is beautiful, and guiding discrimination with respect to what may legitimately be approved as beautiful and what may not' (Veblen 1994:79). The disinterested appreciation of an object is the basis of the leisure class aesthetic system, but only in so far as 'disinterested' refers to the serviceability of an object and not the attitude of the observer. As John Dewey observes: 'For evidence of good standing in the realm of higher culture, [the collector] amasses paintings, statuary, and artistic *bijoux*, as his stocks and bonds certify to his standing in the economic world' (Dewey 1934:8). The leisure class is supremely 'interested' in the social utility of aesthetic experience.

Kant's aesthetic model in *Critique of Judgement* initiated much worthwhile exploration of aesthetic contemplation, but it remains largely impractical as a testable theory in ethnographic research. The utilitarian aspect of aesthetic perception which appears across cultures and classes is as necessary an ingredient to an aesthetic system as the faculties with which to qualitatively judge an experience as aesthetic 'in its own right'. The social utility of Dinka display cattle does not detract from the aesthetic

attachment of value to the experience of the cattle, in fact it is a necessary aspect of the Dinka aesthetic system. Among the Dinka, the French working class, or the industrial leisure class there is an 'ineffable reciprocity of feeling' (Eagleton 1990:20) which arises from the attachment of value to experience, whether that experience be a well-marked calf, a glass of cheap beer, or a hand-wrought spoon.

A discussion of aesthetic perception ends where Kant began in his first critique: it is the attachment of value to experience of objects or events. It is a cognitive process of qualitative evaluation, and as much as cognition is socialised, aesthetic perception is socially constructed and therefore viable as a locus of anthropological inquiry. Aesthetic systems 'materialise a way of experiencing' (Geertz 1983:99), bridging the chasm between the rational, empirical world of material objects and the non-rational, subjective world of experience in its intuitive immediacy. For the Huichol of north-west Mexico, beauty is synonymous with clarity, which 'does not refer solely to their perception of the objective environment, but also to their recognition and understanding of the essences underlying perceptual phenomenon' (Shelton 1992:237). If social science hopes to grasp the process of social formation and its complex variety, it must learn from the Huichol how to grasp the powerful influence of both the objective material world and the collectively subjective experience of that world embodied in aesthetic perception.

Redefining Aesthetic Expression

Aesthetic expression is the human re-creation of experience through which the values attached by means of aesthetic perception are reconstituted and/or transformed.

Aesthetic expression encompasses the whole of the creative process, including not only

the art object or event as a creative product, but the cultural context and production process as well. Expressive forms produce creative works which are constantly re-organising cultural forms in both the institutionalised arenas of artistic expression as well as the mundane realms of everyday activity.

The Problem with Art

The Western and, by association, anthropological, preoccupation with the art object has proven to be a great distraction from a more useful focus on aesthetic expression. There has been a conceptual fusion of aesthetics with 'art' which has resulted not only in the conceptual limitation of aesthetics as critiqued above, but also in the inverted conception of aesthetics as subordinate to the Western, culturally static category of 'fine art'. Fine art, through its particular historical development, has established two defining principles that make its cross-cultural application problematic. These are its sharp distinction between art and craft, and the autonomy of the individual artist

One of the chief differences between Western art produced before and after the Enlightenment of the 18th century is the distinction between what is true art and what is merely skilled craft work. Throughout the centuries leading up to the 18th century, art was closely aligned with the guilds of the Middle Ages that developed as collaborative associations among craftsmen to control competition. While the members of a guild were not directly controlled as to their production, 'in order to succeed within that network, one had to imitate the authoritative models rather than be innovative' (Maquet 1986:202). Even as society moved into what would later be described as the Renaissance, artists were still constrained by the guild system. According to Hauser, in

the early Renaissance 'there arises not only a mixture of styles which is difficult to analyse, but sometimes even an actual balancing of the individual differences, a communal form' (Hauser 1951:47). Hauser goes on to comment that 'the artist's studio of the early Renaissance is still dominated by the communal spirit of the mason's lodge and the guild workshop; the work of art is not yet the expression of an independent personality, emphasising his individuality and excluding himself from all extraneous influences' (Hauser 1951:48).

Enlightenment philosophy replaced the notion of a pre-creative God with the autonomously creative individual. The glorification of consciousness as the only source of truth had serious implications for the artist, who now, in the words of Paul Gauguin, 'created like unto God.' According to Shusterman, the new aesthetic 'insisted that isolation from society and contempt for its common values were crucial to artistic integrity and vision' (Shusterman 1992:192). It also had serious implications for aesthetic theory in general, pioneered by Kant who recognised that under the paradigm of the Enlightenment true art could only exist for its own sake. No longer semantically related to its pre-Enlightenment connotation of skill or craft, art became the highest form of human achievement, the purely creative act produced and appreciated in isolation.

As post-Enlightenment aesthetic philosophy positioned the artist as the ultimate individual, it also positioned originality as the highest achievement in art production. It was at this time that the term originality took on an association with innovation rather than its historically *a priori* connotation: 'an Original . . . rises spontaneously from the vital roots of genius; it grows, it is not made; Imitations are often a sort of manufacture, wrought up by those mechanics, art [as in skill] and labour, out of pre-existent materials not their own' (Young in Williams 1976:230). Williams goes on to point out how this

connotation emphasises an organic growth from genius, not made and therefore mechanical, and taking its material from itself and not from others. Kant describes originality as the first property of artistic genius (Kant 1987:131), and Malraux goes so far as to put artists in an adversarial position to the natural world where they cease to be 'transcribers of the scheme of things' and become 'its rivals' (Malraux 1954:461). The goal was to avoid building on any previous accomplishment, to create from nothing 'like unto God.' Beginning with artists like Gauguin, and continuing through to much of contemporary art, this meant painting entirely from one's own imagination without reference to other works.

This concept of art remains intact in much of contemporary Western aesthetic philosophy. Modern art theory deals with the complex bureaucracy of what qualifies as art and who may legitimately be called an artist. According to Maquet: 'in critical assessments originality and self-expression are given high marks. They also influence the popular stereotypes; for instance, artists are expected to be "different," "marginal," or "bohemian"' (Maquet 1986:172). It is this evolution of Western aesthetics that is responsible for so much of the debate regarding the applicability of 'aesthetics' in a non-Western context (Ingold 1996). Aesthetics has become so inextricably linked to post-Enlightenment art and the requisite autonomy of the individual, that it has become analytically impotent and largely redundant even in its own Western context.

The Philosophical Critique

Pragmatist philosophy has done much to critique this development in Western aesthetics. Perhaps the best known is John Dewey's *Art as Experience*, written at the end of a long

career in the philosophy of education and politics. Paramount in Dewey's approach to art was his desire to recover 'the continuity of esthetic experience with normal processes of living' (Dewey 1934:10). Dewey was convinced that 'underneath the rhythm of every art and of every work of art, there lies . . . the basic pattern of relations of the live creature to his environment' (Dewey 1934:150). Part of this perspective on art and experience was his notion of art as *an* experience in the world. For Dewey, art was not only intimately connected to the lived-in world contemporary Western aesthetics sought to escape, it was itself another layer of experience to be incorporated into the totality of being in the world: 'Through art, meanings of objects . . . are clarified and concentrated, and not by thought working laboriously on them, nor by escape into a world of mere sense, but by creation of a new experience. . . [The work of art], just because it is a full and intense experience, keeps alive the power to experience the common world in its fullness' (Dewey 1934:132).

Part of Dewey's strategy to reconnect art with 'normal processes of living' was to critique the contemporary position of the artist in elite Western society. Dewey describes what he views as an unfortunate chasm between ordinary and so-called aesthetic experience and the 'peculiar esthetic "individualism"' (Dewey 1934:9) that results. In this situation, artists 'exaggerate their separateness to the point of eccentricity. Consequently artistic products take on to a still greater degree the air of something independent and esoteric' (Dewey 1934:9-10). Throughout his work on aesthetics Dewey sought to redress what he viewed as the disconnection between art and the experience of the lived-in world.

Practically contemporaries, though they never met and apparently knew little of each other's work, John Dewey and Maurice Merleau-Ponty shared very similar views on art and experience. Merleau-Ponty, whose indebtedness to Husserl places him in the

academic genealogy of Decartes and Kant, approached the same issues as Dewey through the aegis of phenomenology. The intellectual product of European philosophy, phenomenology originally sought the integration of experience into scientific inquiry. Merleau-Ponty's most notable contribution to this pursuit was his focus on the body as the smallest divisible unit of experience through which all experience is filtered. It was this focus that inspired his approach to art and aesthetics.

Merleau-Ponty, like Dewey, viewed art as intimately related to experience and the famous phenomenological notion of being-in-the-world. According to Merleau-Ponty, 'it is not necessary to abandon the visible world to classical formulas or shut modern painting up in a recess of the individual. There is no choice to be made between the world and art, or between "our senses" and absolute painting, for they blend into one another' (Merleau-Ponty 1993:86). This perspective undermines the contemporary aesthetic focus on originality and individuality as all experience of the world impinges upon our ability to create. The process of creative expression for the painter 'is always only a question . . . of recapturing and generalising an accent which has already appeared in the corner of a previous painting or in some instant of his experience, without the painter himself ever being able to say . . . what comes from him and what comes from things . . . or what he has taken from others as opposed to what is his own' (Merleau-Ponty 1993:93). Speaking directly to Kant, Merleau-Ponty agrees with the impermanence of individual thought as an embodiment of meaning, but adds that we are 'then left to lay hands on it, and it is through expression that we make it our own' (Merleau-Ponty 1989:177).

A more recent pragmatist critique of aesthetic expression in the 'high art' of Western elite society builds on the intellectual legacy of Dewey and Merleau-Ponty.

Richard Shusterman rightly argues that the foundations of Western aesthetics 'rest on the premise that aesthetic creation is necessarily individualistic, a questionable romantic myth nourished by bourgeois liberalism's ideology of individualism, and one which belies art's essential communal dimension' (Shusterman 1992:189). By highlighting the ideological nature of modern Western aesthetics and the contrary phenomenological aspect of everyday life, Shusterman's pragmatist approach to aesthetics has successfully redressed undue weight laid upon the individual artist.

But this critique can be carried further, for the question arises as to whether any composition can arise from itself without reference to any other experience. As St Augustine observed within the paradigm of a monotheistic philosophy, as a creature, man can not create. In this philosophic paradigm, originality in its post-Enlightenment connotation has only been manifest in the Creator God who alone could create from nothing as one who was never Himself created. The common use of the concept 'to create' among humans 'puts a necessary stress on originality and innovation . . . not trivial claims' (Williams 1976:230).

All human composition is necessarily mechanical in the sense of physically putting components together, and in that sense all artists are more accurately artisans who construct from the well of experience re-creative aesthetic products. As Dufrenne, a student of Merleau-Ponty, wrote: 'a psychology of creation must combine tradition with invention, apprenticeship with rebellion' (Dufrenne 1973:103). Shusterman also criticises the modern rarefied approach to art: 'To think that true artistic creation precludes established types and variations on familiar formulas is to confuse art with the artistic ideology of romantic individualism and the modernist avant-garde' (Shusterman 1992:253). The earliest concept of art applied to any kind of skill. It wasn't until the late

18th century that the distinction between artist and artisan came into common use as demonstrated in the exclusion of engravers from the new Royal Academy because they were viewed as skilled manual workers without intellectual or creative purposes (Williams 1976:230). It was at this time, and more so during the late 19th century when the distinction between artist and artisan came into the fullness it has today of the autonomy of the individual and their inherent creative ability.

Of course there is a difference between the engraver and the sculptor, but it is a difference in intention not the presence or absence of some ideal of originality. The intentionality of the artistic process is in the application of concepts and the intellectual re-combination of ideas to express something 'new.' The artist can demonstrate creativity, but only in the sense of re-creation, of putting concepts together in innovative ways, producing something new semantically but old in the sense of its ultimate origins. The mantra of physics that all matter is neither created not destroyed applies equally to the conceptual world.

The Anthropological Critique

Operating in parallel to the pragmatist revision of aesthetic philosophy (though, unfortunately, rarely intersecting), anthropology in recent years has offered its own, highly contested, critique of Western art as the only foundation for a cross-cultural concept of aesthetics. The anthropological critique focuses on Western art as one of many possible manifestations of various cultural aesthetic systems. As Nelson Graburn points out, 'even the label "art" itself reflects the elitist traditions of "high civilisations" concerning the value of arts vs. crafts, the importance of creativity and originality, and

specialisation and distinctions that emerged in Europe and China' (Graburn 1976:3). As art is a qualitative category for objects and events, aesthetics is an evaluative process that subsumes such culturally specific categories in its incorporation of all value attachment systems. This approach highlights the cultural specificity of aesthetics, especially as it relates to the contextualisation of expressive forms and the emphasis on creative process rather than the creative product.

The Western category of art concerns the attachment of value to certain formal qualities of objects or events that retain that value regardless of context. To the Western eye, a Trobriand prow board is considered an art object whether it is viewed cutting through the surf on its way to the Kula or suspended from a museum ceiling. Its aesthetic appreciation is not dependent upon its cultural context. The problem with art as a cross-cultural category is its particularly Western connotation as an end in itself. The Western art object, whether it be a Roman fresco or Duchamp urinal, is viewed and critiqued in isolation. Objects extracted from non-Western cultures are subjected to the same contextually isolated evaluation, and therefore become less a part of their original culture as incorporated into a Western aesthetic. The 'primitivism' of early modern art is one case in point.

The preoccupation with art in isolation has narrowed the Western concept of universal aesthetic forms to those which are principally visual. This is largely due to the practical need for non-Western aesthetic forms to be portable in order to reach Western audiences, resulting in an emphasis on art objects such as sculpture and painting. Coote aptly points out that such an emphasis undervalues the poetic, choreological, and other arts (Coote 1992), but it also excludes the importance of context in the aesthetic experience of any creative product. Rarely is any one creative product meant to be

experienced in isolation from a particular environment. Even Maquet, who otherwise undermines an anthropological critique of Western aesthetics, agrees that 'the best way to apprehend the cultural component in an object is to replace it in the concrete culture in which it is a living presence. The cultural context is where the artefact is functioning as an item having an aesthetic relevance' (Maquet 1986:179). Seger also argues that if music is studied in isolation, it is missing the visual, sensual, and olfactory components of the aesthetic experience. In a sense, the music is taken out of context, physically and culturally (Seger 1994). An aesthetic expression incorporates every aspect of the creative process, placing objects and events in the specific aesthetic setting crucial to its meaningful experience.

The variable, contextual nature of aesthetic experience and its conflation with the Western category of 'art' has prompted some writers to resist a cross-cultural concept of aesthetics. Perhaps best known is Alfred Gell, who makes a sharp distinction between art and technology. For Gell, non-Western objects which would normally fall into a Western category of art are better seen as one part of a larger arsenal of functional technology produced and used by their non-Western fabricators. As such he calls for a 'methodological philistinism' in the study of art outside the West: 'just as the anthropology of religion commences with the explicit or implicit denial of the claims religion makes on believers, so the anthropology of art has to begin with a denial of the claims which objects of art make on the people who live under their spell' (Gell 1992:42). Comparing an anthropology of aesthetics to an anthropological theology, Gell argues against presuming upon relative constructions of truth or in this case, beauty.

The weakness of Gell's argument lies in his insistence on the same narrow, culturally specific connotation of aesthetics that has plagued writers on the subject since

Kant. Confusing his own particular Western aesthetic system with aesthetics as a generic social process of value attachment, Gell falls into the very trap he argues so persuasively to avoid. Contrary to his comparison with theology, an anthropology of aesthetics seeks to understand the process of value attachment, not address the issue of whether some object is 'truly' beautiful.

Though his ideas do not alter drastically, Gell's latest and unfortunately last attempt to tackle art from an anthropological perspective deserves some comment. In *Art and Agency*, published posthumously and somewhat incomplete, Gell maintains his discomfort with the notion of cross-cultural aesthetics, but extends his concept of art as technology into a more generalisable approach to art as an 'index of agency'. In a commendable move away from strictly symbolic interpretations of art, Gell moves tentatively toward a connection between art and non-discursive experience. As he writes: 'in place of symbolic communication, I place all the emphasis on *agency, intention, causation, result*, and *transformation*. I view art as a system of action, intended to change the world rather than encode symbolic propositions about it' (Gell 1998:6, emphasis in original). Situating art in a nexus of human relations, Gell theorises art objects as extensions of human agency, endowed by their creators with certain amounts of social power. But his focus remains on the art object, which in his formulation can include the human body, thus denying the primacy of the creative process and emphasising a Cartesian disembodiment of social actors. This approach renders the anthropological approach to creative practice and expressive forms a strictly Western enterprise, concerned with strictly Western categories and analytically inapplicable outside a Western context.

It is important to point out that twenty years before Gell formulated his theory of art and agency, Toni Flores Fratto was writing about art as a form of action without denying the embodiment of social actors nor the inherent social power of art objects. As she writes: 'the sculpted funeral poles [of the Tiwi] do not merely symbolise the movement of the spirit from the realm of the living to the realm of the dead, they *move it* from one to the other' (Fratto 1978:132, emphasis in original). Fratto's concept of art placed objects on an equal plane of potential agency with human actors such that the social world was partly constituted, not merely mediated, by material objects. As Fratto concludes: 'The material-social world is changed by the artist (that is, everyone) and the artist is changed by it; the result of the dialectical relation between actor-artist and cultural given is a "new world", a synthesis, a new context, with the two components . . . in a new relationship to each other' (Fratto 1978:136). As such, Fratto was uncomfortable with the concept of art as a static, non-functional Western creation, opting instead for a notion of creative 'work' which may or may not produce something 'beautiful'.

Fratto's frustration with art's stasis as a Western category was based on its denial, or at least concealment, of the creative process, a quality apparently admired by Gell. This highlights the problem with the fusion of aesthetics and art as it not only limits aesthetics as a Western category, it also obscures the potential for aesthetics to examine expressive processes. For example, the Eskimo emphasise process in expressive forms, especially sculpture, and often care little for the objects themselves (Layton 1991:31-33; see also Carpentar 1961). To focus on the tiny sculptures, which the Eskimo often discard, amounts to an idolatry of objects isolated from the meaning imbued through the

productive process. The anthropology of aesthetics gives primacy to the expressive process where product matters less than, or at least as much as, production.

A work of art is just that, a work, or an act of expression. But more than that, art is part of culture which is itself creative practice. As David Guss discovered among the Yekuana, to understand culture's inner workings is to participate in its creation. Indeed, Guss maintains that culture is not 'the distillation of abstract ideals but an ongoing act of creation', where 'to tell a story . . . [is] to weave a basket, just as it [is] to make a canoe, to prepare a barbasco, to build a house, to clear a garden, to give birth, to die' (Guss 1989:4). The anthropology of aesthetics is concerned with the *work* of art as well as other processes of expression which participate in the daily creative practice of cultural production.

Crucial to this emphasis on process, creative practice and work in an anthropology of aesthetics is a focus on the body and embodiment that is ordinarily excluded from more traditional studies of art and art products. Creative practice involves action, and 'action is necessarily bodily' (Lyon and Barbalet 1994:50). As action is bodily, it is embodied, and as it is embodied, it is engaged in the world and therefore 'fundamentally social' (Turner 1984:233). As such, embodiment resolves the false dichotomy between mind and body and offers an analytical starting point for grasping lived experience in the creative practice of aesthetic expression.

Recent moves toward an anthropology of the body have directly challenged what John Blacking (1977) refers to as the 'dismal' and 'pathological' mind/body dichotomy. The split between the mind as the locus of rational consciousness and the body as its 'natural', irrational counterpart inspired early views of the body's materiality as part of a semiotic field exterior to the human subject/mind. More recent theorisations have

focused on the concept of embodiment; or as Francis Huxley puts it: 'the distinction between *having* a body and *being* one' (Huxley 1977:29, emphasis in original; see also Turner 1984). Charles Varela, preferring the concept of person to embodiment, explains that 'it is not the *mind* that moves the body, nor the *body* that minds itself in moving, but the *person* acting' (Varela 1995:246, emphasis in original). This approach builds from the phenomenological emphasis on embodiment as being-in-the-world as opposed to the structuralist emphasis on the body as part of a system of representation. As Thomas Csordas contends: 'the distinction between representation and being-in-the-world is methodologically critical, for it is the difference between understanding culture in terms of objectified abstraction and existential immediacy' (Csordas 1994:10, see also Bourdieu 1990:73).

The centrality of embodiment in an anthropology of aesthetics is especially important to the issues dealt with in this thesis. The notions of race and gender are both invariably linked to experiences of and through the body. For example, blackness becomes something one *has* as part of a body image, but also something one *is* as part of an embodiment of experience. As embodiment is rooted in an aesthetic system of value attachment, modes of identity like race and gender that are closely aligned with body types, and as such are popularly considered to be biologically determined, become more flexible. Ultimately, the question arises as to whether or not race and gender are more productively theorised as aesthetic categories.

The thrust of the anthropological critique of Western aesthetics is its focus on the culturally and historically specific phenomenon of art rather than the complex system of perception and expression of which art is merely one part. Coote contends that aesthetics 'offers us a cross-culturally valid field of inquiry, which partially subsumes "art" without

detracting from the latter's historical and cultural specificity' (Coote 1989:232). It is this more anthropological concept of aesthetics that this thesis takes as a theoretical point of departure.

This is evident throughout the analysis to follow which seeks a holistic account of Limonense creative practice. The peculiar paradoxes of Puerto Limón make it all the more ideal for this kind of study: a Third World context thoroughly immersed in First World media and migration; an Anglophone Caribbean population in a Spanish colonial, Latin American setting; a matriarchal cultural orientation to female-headed households in a patriarchal society. These various conflicting intersections render the clear cut distinctions between the West and the rest, so prevalent in the academic exclusion of aesthetics, inapplicable to the Limón case. They also force the analysis to deal with traditional expressive boundaries between art and craft in painting, music and literature among others, and at a deeper level, to re-examine the parsing of various forms into discrete categories in the first place. As a result, the focus of analysis is on the underlying current of everyday creative practice which is made manifest in various expressive forms.

Identity and Aesthetic Experience

The above reformulations of aesthetic perception and expression are intended as an anthropological corrective to the abstractions of analytical philosophy and the hegemony of Western 'high culture'. Indeed, Plato himself understood that the rudimentary essence of aesthetics was its affiliation with common folk, a fact which inspired much of his philosophical revulsion to its various material expressions. John Dewey claimed that 'underneath the rhythm of every art and of every work of art, there lies . . . the basic

pattern of relations of the live creature to his environment' (Dewey 1934:150). This thesis seeks to return the notion of aesthetics to its rightful place in the everyday lives of everyday people, and as such, seeks out the connections between aesthetics and everyday social processes.

Identity, much like aesthetics, has, as a theoretical concept, been largely reified in social science literature to become at best a detached ideological construct, and at worst the invention of scientists themselves to help explain what has never existed 'on the ground'. Most often it appears as a suffix to terms like ethnic, racial, gender, and national, all of which remain highly contested as politically loaded rather than benignly descriptive.

Still, even as terms like ethnicity and gender are appropriated 'on the ground' to express politically charged ideologies of identity, there is a very real intersection of experience that impinges on those ideals. To self-identify with a specific, and hopefully mutually understood, ideological notion of identity is to engage a whole host of cultural associations with that ideal that reverberate, sometimes violently, in actual experience. Marshall Sahlins describes this phenomenon as the 'functional revaluation of signs': 'the problem comes down to the relation of cultural concepts to human experience . . . In action people put their concepts and categories into ostensive relations to the world. Every implementation of cultural concepts in an actual world submits the concepts to some determination by the situation' (Sahlins 1987:145,149). The material reality experienced in the enactment of ideological concepts creates a new disposition in regard to the ideal that either undermines or reinforces its position as a desirable locus of self-identification.

Through this process a dialectic is established between the discursive realm of conceptual meaning in the form of ideology and the non-discursive realm of lived experience. These oppositional categories intentionally reflect and critique the linguistic bias of post-structuralist social theory. The notion of a 'discursive realm' is rooted in the concept of discourse, where language mediates all experience and the world is parsed into a series of readable texts. Chris Gosden has observed that it is perhaps not surprising that academics, whose medium of communication is language, feel comfortable with a view of experience as inherently readable and inscribeable. However, as Gosden points out, 'what is lost in looking at the world as language is the efficacity of the object world . . . Material culture may not be straightforwardly meaningful to us, but often operates at a level below that of consciousness, helping to create the dimensions of a world in which we can live' (Gosden 1992:807). That 'level below consciousness' is what I have called the non-discursive realm of lived experience. It operates outside of the ongoing discourse of texts, and as such offers the Archimedian space from which to lever the world of discursive meaning. The productive conflict thus established between discourse and immediate experience de-centres the rather one-sided conversation of post-structuralism in favour of a 'creative interaction between people and the material world' where they 'shape each other in mutual interaction' (Gosden 1992:807).

This phenomenological corrective to the post-structuralist emphasis on discourse and the ideological pole of identity formation will be developed more fully below, but it is important to note how it highlights what has long been understood about identity as a product of conflict. Ethnicity, race, gender and nationalism are all concerned with the politics of exclusion and the conflict between definers and the defined, but there remains

this deeper ideological/phenomenological dimension to the conflict that affects both sides on individual and collective levels.

Because this process proceeds on a socio-psychological level, it is difficult to pin down, to see how it develops 'in an actual world'. By examining how it might be connected to a similar process in a culturally specific aesthetic system, the process of identity formation as a dialectic between ideology and phenomenology is given a material reality. The ongoing development of a cultural aesthetic literally fleshes out the process of identity formation, which makes the ideal real for cultural participants (and participant/observers).

This of course is not the first attempt to draw the connection between aesthetics, creative expression and identity. Eagleton describes the ultimate binding forces of social order as 'habits, pieties, sentiments, and affections,' attributing the formation of these forces to aesthetic experience (Eagleton 1990:20). Eagleton's 'new subject', for which we may substitute a cultural collectivity, finds in aesthetics an absolute upon which it can establish a 'law at one with its immediate experience' (Eagleton 1990:20). Fratto also connects aesthetics to ideology where both provide a culturally specific way of knowing the world, and as such 'offer to the participants in a society a model upon which they may (and by implication should) base their beliefs, their behaviour, and their characters' (Fratto 1986:250). For Geertz, the 'comprehensive factual "is"' from which grows 'the powerfully coercive "ought"' (Geertz 1973:126) owes its existence to aesthetic experience.

For these and others, aesthetic experience within the context of a particular culture is necessarily filtered through the process of socialisation. An initiate is not only introduced to ways of interacting, but also to ways of perceiving the sensory world. In

this way, there is an aesthetic disposition common to a particular group, establishing a social bond at the level of the sub-conscious. The connection can be inarticulate, but each understands the value of, and can share in, certain experiences. Cultural members are therefore inclined to maintain that bond on the conscious level through political and economic means.

The focus, however, is almost invariably on the ideological aspect of the cultural aesthetic system. The often ignored phenomenological undercurrent to the conceptual dominance of ideology in an aesthetic system is crucial to an understanding of how aesthetics relates to social processes such as identity formation.

In the preface to his *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty describes his philosophy as a 'return to things themselves . . . to that world which precedes knowledge, of which knowledge always *speaks*' (Merleau-Ponty 1989:ix). From the outset he sets up a conflict between the ideological world of rarefied scientific objectivity and the phenomenological world of sensory perception 'where the paths of my various experiences intersect, and also where my own and other people's intersect and engage each other like gears' (Merleau-Ponty 1989:xx). Building on Husserl's notion of the lifeworld, Merleau-Ponty establishes the parameters (or lack thereof) for the 'real' world of experience, a 'world no longer conceived as a collection of determinate objects, but as the horizon latent in all our experience and itself ever-present and anterior to every determining thought' (Merleau-Ponty 1989:92).

This concept of a phenomenological world beneath or 'behind' an ideal world of codified symbols pregnant with objective meaning (the cultural 'web of meaning' so important to semiotic anthropology) is not necessarily based on a value judgement of authenticity. Husserl's *Lebenswelt*, or lifeworld, is the '"actually concrete surrounding

world" . . . the reality proper in which we live and, for us, the always already pregiven, preexistent ground and horizon for all theoretical and extratheoretical praxis' (Bernet, et al. 1993:224). This world of immediate experience, that is, literally un-mediated by conceptual categories, breathes life into those very categories that mediate our meaningfully ideal world. The two are in relational opposition, but are related nonetheless.

The two worlds remain in conflict as the ideological realm of discursive meaning tries to pin down immediate experience, which is always already moving on. Dewey recognised this process as a kind of rhythm toward an ultimately unattainable equilibrium: 'In the process of living, attainment of a period of equilibrium is at the same time the initiation of a new relation to the environment, one that brings with it potency of new adjustments to be made through struggle' (Dewey 1934:17). For Dewey, the notion of lived experience 'signifies active and alert commerce with the world . . . it affords our sole demonstration of a stability that is not stagnation but is rhythmic and developing' (Dewey 1934:19). David Guss describes the same phenomenon this way: 'like an unfinished symphony, culture is a work of art never meant to be completed. Its expressiveness demands that it be endlessly recreated and that its appreciation derive from this process of creation' (Guss 1989:67). The rhythmic development of stability in our relation to the world, both as a mediated conceptual nexus of meaning and an un-mediated locus of experience, characterises the dialectic between ideology and phenomenology/experience.

Both Dewey and Merleau-Ponty related their respective pragmatic and phenomenological ideas to aesthetic experience. Merleau-Ponty emphasised the ability of aesthetic expression to bring latent experience to the surface where it intersected the

lived-in world. Dewey went so far as to claim that 'because experience is the fulfilment of an organism in its struggles and achievements in a world of things, it is art in germ' (Dewey 1934:19). Both stressed the powerful role of aesthetic experience in the interplay of ideology and phenomenology/experience.

The notion of an aesthetic system as a cross-cultural process of value attachment outlined in this chapter and developed throughout the thesis seeks to clarify this role further. Specifically, the thesis examines the complex process of identity formation (a topic explored more fully in regard to the particular ethnographic context of Puerto Limón in the next two chapters) as intimately related to an aesthetic system where both are born in the conflict between the real and the ideal; that is, they are both products of a dialectic between the discursive realm of conceptual meaning and the non-discursive realm of lived experience.

Notes

[1] This chapter is a much revised version of a paper written prior to fieldwork. It originally appeared as 'The Anthropology of Aesthetics: A cross-cultural approach' in the Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford (Sharman 1997).

CHAPTER TWO

PUERTO LIMÓN AND ETHNICITY:

Past and Present

'The problem was that when the UFC came there to plant bananas, the Ticos from the Central Valley, they don't like Limón'.

Joaquin spoke through a smile with a raspy, broken English.

'So the UFC brought all those Negroes from Panama. Then came the Chinese . . . in Limón there are many Chinese. So when I was a boy my friends were Chinese, Negroes. It was very good to have that diversity of races'.

The ageing novelist, with his tousled shock of stark white hair and perpetual grin, shifted in the small leather chair that unsuccessfully tried to accommodate his rather lengthy frame.

'Yes, my memories of my youth in Limón are very strong. Limón, the life in Limón, is very strong. All the races, the whole world is there. Limón was a wonderful place to spend my youth'.

He thought for a moment, and added, 'Really, it's another country'.

As though it were some distant nation, many consider Limón a place apart from the rest of Costa Rica (see Figure 2.1). Its history and its people diverge from, and often conflict with, the national self-image, leaving the region culturally and politically ambiguous. Locals and outsiders refer to this ambiguity as an identity crisis, and it continues to inspire a myriad strategies to achieve social cohesion. Most often these strategies remain on an intra-ethnic level, leaving the multi-ethnic whole of Limón scattered and segregated.

One incident may help clarify the dynamic. In one of my first few forays into the city centre of Limón, I stumbled upon a small art gallery and craft shop. I had only recently discovered the thriving canvas art community in the city, and this small gallery

was the only commercial outlet I had encountered. The walls were covered with canvases by several different artists, including a few by the owner, Vera Beatriz. On the few shelves were carved coconuts, costume jewellery, and other small crafts made by the local artisans co-operative. One canvas in particular caught my eye. It was a night scene on a beach. Yellow lanterns lit up a wooden house on stilts, and a few Afro-Caribbeans lounged about the porch. I asked Vera if she could introduce me to the artist, and she proceeded to give me directions to his house. She explained that he lived in Cieneguita, one of the more notoriously dangerous barrios. To clarify her description I asked if he was black. 'Oh, no,' she said, 'he's white'. She touched the golden skin of her arm and offered, 'Like me'.

This seemingly benign incident expresses some of the ethnic complexity inherent in the Limonense context. On one level, the artist, a white Costa Rican, is reinforcing the images associated with an idealised black identity in his painting - especially jarring given the rather overtly racist comments he would later make during taped interviews. Moreover, the artist resides in Cieneguita, commonly known as a 'black' barrio, though demographically, much like the gap in the perceptions of outsiders regarding Limón in general, it is more or less split between white Costa Ricans and Afro-Costa Ricans. Finally, and perhaps most telling, is Vera's clarification that the artist was not only white, but 'white like me'. The fact that she did not include myself, an Anglo-North American, in her description of his skin tone sheds some light on the subtlety of self-identification. Vera understood there to be a very real difference between her whiteness and my whiteness, not to mention the apparently much wider gap between our skin tone and that of *los negros*. These differences, however, did not pre-empt her own self-identification as black when, in a later conversation, she commented on an encounter with whites from

the Central Valley who presumed all Limonenses were black (see Chapter Three).

The layers of ethnic complexity doubtless run deeper still. The intention here is to provide some background as to how this complexity came about and how it impacts the development of a cultural aesthetic and, in turn, some semblance of social cohesion. Limón's past is particularly important in this endeavour, as it boasts a rather unique set of historical circumstances that have contributed to the contemporary setting. Within that contemporary setting, history as collective and individual memory is constantly informing the negotiation of meaning and experience. Within that negotiation, an ideal notion of blackness has become crucial to the formation of Limonense identity. Whether as an implementation of ideology or a more intuitive, phenomenological notion of difference, Limonense have used their Afro-Caribbean roots to appropriate their own cultural space in the shadow of Costa Rican nationalism, hoping to build that elusive sense of *La Limonense*.

Puerto Limón: The Historical Background

The founding and social development of Limón is part of what may be described as the Caribbean diaspora, or second synthesis in the history of Afro-America. In as much as the Caribbean islands contain all the complexities of cultural pluralism, demographic instability and national/ethnic ambiguity, the Caribbean diaspora embodies all that and more. As the middle passage ideologically homogenised slaves into 'Africans', so the massive emigration out of the Caribbean since the end of slavery has ideologically homogenised the various disparate islanders into 'Afro-Americans'. The result is a people with even less history and an even greater disconnection from any permanent,

material idea of home.

As with most historical accounts of the 'New World', the story of Puerto Limón begins with Columbus. The fact that various indigenous groups foraged in the tropical forests along the Caribbean coast of present-day Costa Rica seems lost in much of the written accounts of the area. In all fairness this is largely due to the relatively low population of early indigenous inhabitants of the region as compared to other parts of Central America and the Caribbean islands. The extreme climactic conditions of what is now Limón province proved inhospitable to most human activity, a fact which would eventually play a crucial role in the development of Limón's demography.

On 18 September 1502, Columbus dropped anchor off the tiny coastal island of Uvita in the bay of Cariay, so named by those few indigenous groups who managed to carve out an existence along the coast. Some scholars insist the first people of African descent to arrive at Limón were slaves in the service of Columbus (Royal and Perry 1996; Duncan and Melendez 1972), while Purcell places them slightly later at the year 1522 (Purcell 1993). In either case, the first phase of African-American settlement began in the early 16th century and continued to trickle into the region through the 17th century as slave labour (Purcell 1993). Due to the inhospitable climate, the small cacao plantations initiated at this time were run by mostly absentee owners, leaving the relatively small slave population unsupervised. As a result, many of the slaves simply walked off the plantation and contributed to the growing Miskito and Black Carib populations of Nicaragua and Honduras (Lefever 1992; Helms 1977).

The settlement of Perafan de Ribera and family as governor of present day Puntarenas on the Pacific Coast in 1566 officially marks the end of the 'conquest' of Costa Rica (Jones 1935:12). From this time until the beginning of the 19th century, Costa

Rica experienced a very slow colonial development. The cruel misnomer rudely awakened Spanish colonists who came to Costa Rica in search of the 'Rich Coast'. Life on the coast, at least on the Atlantic side, proved too harsh to endure, leading most to settle on the highland Central Valley. The remoteness of the region made communication with the rest of the Spanish colonial network difficult at best, and much needed supplies seldom reached their destination. In desperation, the colonists made sporadic slave raids on the few scattered tribes of the Atlantic coast in order to maintain a ready labour force (Jones 1935).

It was during this time that the 'white myth' of Costa Rica grew. The modern national portrayal of colonial times is one of classless co-operation among an almost completely Spanish population in the Central Valley. Godmundson (1986) refutes this claim, arguing the settlers formed small proto-industrial villages which divided occupation by an ethnic hierarchy of Native Americans, some African Americans, and a growing *mestizo* population. Still, the myth of racial purity and egalitarianism would have a great effect on the future Afro-Costa Rican population.

The second phase of Afro-American settlement in Costa Rica began towards the end of the 18th century with seasonal turtle hunters from Panama and Nicaragua (Palmer 1993; Lefever 1992). Beginning with a few subsistence crops to sustain their annual trips by boat to Costa Rica's Caribbean coral reefs, the hunters slowly carved a life from the largely deserted coast land. These settlements developed at a slow pace into villages and towns that demographically would have little impact on the future of the region or the nation. But for future Afro-Costa Ricans, the early Afro-American settlers sowed the seeds of territorial legitimacy that would substantiate their claim to the cultural foundations of the region.

The first half of the 19th century stands in marked contrast to the rather uneventful history of Spanish colonialism in Costa Rica. In 1821, Guatemala declared independence from Spain with little or no resistance. In November of that same year, Costa Rica joined the rest of Central America in the peaceful cessation from Spain. As Jones describes it: 'Independence was not won by Costa Rica, it dropped into her lap' (Jones 1935:19).

Civil war broke out in April of 1823 over whether to remain independent or join Colombia or Mexico. Republicans favouring independence won, and the five independent states of Central America established the federation of 'The United Provinces of Central America'. The rare demonstration of Central American unity proved fleeting as two decades later Costa Rica adopted a constitution and officially severed political ties with the federation of Central American states (Jones 1935).

As an independent nation, Costa Rica began searching for ways to capitalise on the flourishing coffee plantations north of San José. The port city of Puntarenas, on the Pacific coast, proved too far from the coffee-producing lands, and too inconvenient for export to Europe. A port on the Atlantic coast seemed much more suitable, and for the first time since the 16th century, Costa Rica sought to develop the Atlantic region.

On 20 September 1867, Limón was officially opened as a port (Creedman 1991). In 1871, the first warehouse was built at the port after the dictator Tomas Guardia initiated plans to develop a railway connecting the Atlantic coast to the coffee producing highlands (Royal and Perry 1996). Guardia and North American Henry Meiggs negotiated the initial railway construction contract. Meiggs gave the project over to his nephew Minor C. Keith who would leave a lasting impression on the social landscape of the region and the nation.

The indigenous tribes of Bribri and Cabecores in the south near the present

Panamanian border inhabited most of the coast when Keith began construction on the railway (Purcell 1993). Using indigenous labourers soon proved untenable in light of the extreme working conditions and the relatively small population. Keith began to import labour, mostly from China, and some from Italy. Decades later, Abel Pacheco would write: 'The first [Chinese] came to sow the rails because someone doubted that yellow fever would kill those of a similar colour. Our history is full of this kind of reasoning. This ground is also full of their dead bodies' (Pacheco 1972:17).

Keith promoted the 1500 Italians he imported as 'good humble thrifty workers free from the vice of liquor and [who] almost all know how to read and write. Furthermore, they are of a superior race which will do the country good as they mix in with the rest of the natives' (Bourgois 1989:47-48). Despite their allegedly laudable racial qualities, the Italians proved as unwilling to work in the oppressive climactic conditions as the Chinese, Indigenous, or Costa Rican groups Keith contracted. In 1874, Chinese railroad workers rebelled and killed several North American camp managers. In June of 1888, the Italians went on a hunger strike to Cartago, the second largest city on the central plain. Six men died and most won repatriation to Italy (Echeverri-Gent 1992).

In 1872, Keith brought the first group of West Indian labourers, mostly from Jamaica, to Limón. A major depression in the sugar industry as well as the lack of employment opportunities in post-slavery Jamaica provided an eager labour pool for Keith. Despite the popular mis-conception that Afro-Caribbeans were somehow better suited to the oppressive working conditions of the Atlantic coastal region, 4,000 lives were lost in the laying of the first 20 miles of track. As one elderly Limonense said: 'Under every one of those poleen [railroad tie] is the body of a coloured man' (Purcell 1993:26). By 1883, Puerto Limón and its 1,848 inhabitants handled one-third of all

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.

Despite their new status as Costa Rican citizens, these changes left the predominantly English-speaking Afro-Costa Ricans at a distinct and unfamiliar disadvantage. The language of Afro-Costa Ricans was the language of power on the plantation, and for decades Afro-Costa Ricans maintained a sense of cultural superiority over their white Costa Rican counterparts. Now their language was the chief stumbling block to the new social mobility lauded by the new government. It was as if Afro-Costa Ricans were the static fulcrum upon which the world of power and status suddenly turned.

The response to the sudden inversion of Costa Rican social hierarchy after the civil war was to place an even greater emphasis on education among Afro-Costa Ricans. By 1960, many of the Afro-Costa Rican farmers who acquired land from the UFC were in a position to send their children on to the universities of the Central Valley. Those children who returned to Limón province headed for Puerto Limón to put their education to use. By 1980, 30.5% of Afro-Costa Rican workers held white collar jobs versus 21.1% of white Costa Ricans (Bourgois 1989). The new emphasis on 'soft' office work created an renewed image of superiority among Afro-Costa Ricans in Limón. Afro-Costa Ricans told Bourgois not to write that they still worked the banana fields: 'You may think you see Blacks working for the company but they're not black Blacks,' or 'He's of black

colour but not of black race' (Bourgois 1989:84). This renewed self-image also contributed to closer scrutiny on the issue of racial discrimination. In 1978, Afro-Costa Ricans held a conference concerning their position in Costa Rica and the issue of racism. Some positive results were the inclusion of Afro-American history in the curriculum of schools and universities, and the declaration of August 30th as Black Costa Rican Day (Purcell 1993). More importantly, it illustrated the complexities involved in the formation of a collective identity in the multi-ethnic milieu of Puerto Limón.

Contemporary Context

First Impressions

One of my first experiences with the contemporary cultural complexity of Puerto Limón took place at a baseball game in the first few weeks of fieldwork. The stadium 'Big Boy', just opposite the football stadium, is one of the only baseball stadiums in Costa Rica. Erected by North American management personnel in the early days of the UFC, the stadium has seen various waves of popularity within the local community. Today it appears to rest languidly on the low ebb of that fickle cycle. Still, the province of Limón manages to contribute several teams to the 'international' league which represents most of the Central American countries on the Caribbean Coast. No doubt many if not all of the teams are the progeny of North American transnational occupation at the turn of the century.

I would soon learn from experience that there is no such thing as stopping in town to 'run a few errands' on the way to a planned event. On this occasion I stumbled into the

celebration of 135 years of Limón as a county. It also happened to be a national holiday in honour of Guanacaste, a Pacific coast province, and its annexation from Nicaragua. The main avenue of the city centre was closed to traffic and filled with the rattling beat of school marching bands. Each of the seven or eight bands had the same basic divisions between banner and flag bearers, dancing girls, xylophone players, drummers and cymbal players. The groups would march forward slowly as the usually male drum section would beat out a complex and very loud rhythm blending with the sounds of other percussion sections nearby. Crowds lined the sidewalks and watched patiently as the parade passed. Some kids not participating silently went through the motions of the marchers as they passed, and some children, out of uniform, mingled with the marchers in the street. There was a general feeling of disorganisation held together by the complex drum beats and the slow but sure forward progression.

By the time I arrived at the baseball stadium I was so late I entered for free. Unable to discern the loyalties of the two separate grandstands, I took the nearest available seat. The teams were indistinguishable, few players had matching uniforms and some had to share gloves with players from the opposing team. The spectators seemed more interested in each other than what was happening on the field, and a few sharp, beer-slurred words were exchanged between men. The whole event had the air of more than just disorganisation; it was as if at any moment it could all unravel into chaos. As I left I passed by a few temporary booths known as *chinamos* erected for the impending street festival after the parade.

These experiences embody much of what makes the contemporary context of Puerto Limón as dynamic as its eventful past. There is that constant sense of barely controlled chaos that occasional falls into entropic order where the 'ineffable reciprocity

of feeling' (Eagleton 1990:20) among Limonenses coalesces into a distinct cultural aesthetic of difference. The aesthetic of difference is constructed both internally, in relation to the variously constituted groups of ethnic identification, and externally, in relation to the historically distant national polity of Costa Rica.

As these internal and external divisions became more and more clear over the course of fieldwork, I began to see the contemporary context as intimately connected to the history of structured differentiation in Limón. This cuts across racial, ethnic, gender and nationalist lines, in all of their disparate connotations in regard to an articulated regional identity. As in Limón's past, the axis about which these various lines intersect and revolve remains the reified distinction between black and white.

An 'Ethnic' City in Black and White

The extent to which Limón is essentialised as a 'black' city in a 'black' province is explored more fully in the next chapter, but it is important to introduce some of the dynamics of this phenomenon here as it colours, literally and figuratively, every facet of the contemporary context.

From culture to climate, Limón is undeniably distinct from anywhere else in Costa Rica. This is evident in everything from language to cuisine and exacerbated by the overlap between those (most often white) Costa Ricans who live in Limón but wish they could move away, and those (most often Afro-) Costa Ricans who live in the highlands but wish they could move back.

Perhaps one of the best illustrations of how language engages in differentiation is found in the small population of Afro-Costa Ricans on the Pacific Coast of Costa Rica

known as *pardos*. Descendent from self-liberated slaves who worked their way up the coast from South America, the pardos differ greatly from Afro-Costa Ricans in Limón, and not only because of their very different migratory history. One Afro-Costa Rican from Limón, travelling in Guanacaste on the Pacific coast was shocked to discover pardos who did not ethnically or racially identify with him. As he related to me, the startling explanation given was: '*No soy Negro, no hablo Ingles*' ('I'm not black, I don't speak English'). This disassociation occurs on the part of Limonenses as well. When Bourgois was told that the blacks he saw working the fields were not *black* blacks, they were referring to labourers from Guanacaste. Obviously the salient point here is that the ethnic or racial distinction is not always based on phenotype, but, at least in one case, on language.

The power of language demonstrated in the particular history of ethnic interaction on the banana plantations earlier in the century is no less important in the contemporary context. This is especially true when it comes to the persistent categorisation of Limón and Limonenses by outsiders. The English language, which had such currency on the plantation, has come to signify the backwardness of Afro-Costa Ricans, and by implication, all Limonenses. The 'Limón Standard' as it has been dubbed by linguists is known as 'bad English' by outsiders who often try their hand at mimicking a few stock phrases when speaking of Limón. This particular devaluation of English as it is spoken occasionally in Limón is not surprising given the recent rise in prestige of English fluency due to the importance of the United States to Costa Rica. It is also important to remember that the devaluation of Limón English has less do to with its perceived backwardness as it does its demarcation of difference. It is one more reason why Limón does not fit with the rest of Costa Rica.

The great linguistic irony of Limón's historical development is the current emphasis on English in the national education curriculum. When Limón began, English was the language of power, and Anglophone West Indian immigrants wielded that power unchallenged by Spanish-speaking locals. When the socialising revolution of the 1940s and 50s nationalised education, the hierarchy was inverted and English became the language of the backward and uneducated. With the implementation of a certification program for teachers, Costa Rica effectively dismantled the private English education institutions of Limón. Now, with the political and economic importance of the United States, English has become the new key to advancement. English is being taught in schools and private English courses are sprouting up throughout the country. Instead of Limón leading the way in this new source of intellectual capital, they are playing catch-up with the rest of the country as few Limonenses born after 1950 speak English fluently.

Inasmuch as language marks cultural difference, Limonense cuisine is perhaps the most commonly invoked example of cultural distinction. The distinctness of Limonense food appears even before one reaches the city on the three-hour bus ride down from the mountains. '*Pati, pati . . . pati caliente!*' announces one's final descent into the region where Afro-Costa Ricans sell their baked goods at every short stop. *Pati*, fried or baked pastry filled with spicy meat, joins the ranks of *pan bon*, *gisada*, *bofe con yuca*, and 'rice and beans' as *comida tipica de Limón* (typical Limonense food). Stepping off the bus in the city centre of Puerto Limón, one is greeted by dozens more bakers selling their wares (see Figure 2.2). A few blocks away at the central market is the prominent fast food counter 'Rice and Beans'.

All of these different expressions of Limonense cuisine are tied to the overarching issue of ethnic identification. These foods are Limonense foods, and by implication,

Afro-Costa Rican foods, and there is an articulated fear that they will one day disappear. Prompted by the comments of other bakers in Puerto Limón, I asked one professional baker if he was concerned that Costa Ricans from the highlands might get his recipes and take away business. He thought for a moment, and said:

> I hear that on the street, but still, they surely never will make this type of bread. They could make it, but they don't like to, they mostly like to make the Spanish bread. For me, I just can't make the Spanish bread. I try it and it just don't come out the way it should. They add plenty more to it outside the yeast and ingredients. They add more things to it to preserve it and all those things. More things than we usually use. We just use yeast, salt, shortening, and cheese. They add more chemicals to it. Limón bread is less processed, more natural.

Lindford sums it up well when he says he 'just can't make the Spanish bread'. Any local effort at cultural conformity to the national ideal ends in a frustrated, 'it just don't come out like it should'.

This despairing response is heard on both sides of the divide between Limón and the Central Valley. Many outsiders view Limón as hopelessly different. And though highland Costa Ricans could attempt some cultural compromise, some meeting in the middle, history and politics have placed the onus on Limonenses to conform or forever remain the pariah. To carry the baking analogy, white Costa Ricans 'could make it, but they don't like to, they mostly like to make the Spanish bread'.

Like the various breads associated with Limonense cuisine, the famous 'rice and beans' helps to forge the lines of ethnic difference where Limonense cultural life is boiled down to a basic black and white opposition. White Costa Ricans from the highlands learn early how to pronounce 'rice and beans', thus codifying the cultural distance between 'us' and 'them'. Limonenses themselves rarely prepare the celebrated dish of rice and beans cooked with coconut milk, though it is usually featured on the menus of local restaurants.

Interestingly, one of the only times I was treated to home-made rice and beans

was in the home of an Afro-Costa Rican living in San José. The occasion had all the trappings of an overt display of a personal connection to Limón, though my host could not foresee ever moving back. Similarly, one white Costa Rican friend living in San José who grew up in Limón always requested *pati* whenever I visited. These cultural connections to food by outsiders amount to a symbolic ethnicity, where those who are displaced or otherwise disconnected from a particular cultural setting create 'ethnic symbols . . . "abstracted" from that culture and pulled out of its moorings, so to speak, to become stand-ins for it' (Gans 1979:9).

Of course, to make a distinction between symbolic ethnicity and 'real' ethnicity betrays a particular socio-scientific bias toward reification prevalent in the 1960s and 70s. Heavily influenced by the research of Glazer and Moynihan (1975), as well as Barth's (1969) famous essay, social science experienced a wave of enthusiasm for the concept of ethnicity (see Eriksen 1993; Banks 1996). The wealth of literature on the subject during this time was no doubt due in part to the global population shifts of the first half of the century, but it is hard not to imagine that it was also a comfortable alternative to the politically charged notion of race.

Like race, ethnicity remains important if for no other reason than for its persistence as means to differentiation in the process of group and self-identification. As Paul Gilroy points out: ""race" is a relational concept which does not have fixed referents' (Gilroy 1987:229). Both race and ethnicity are socially constructed phenomenon, which like gender and nationalism depend on oppositional categories to delineate their respective values. In this sense all of these terms are negative terms in that they are defined by what they are not. But they still carry a certain currency in everyday experience. As Bourgois (1989) concludes, whether or not there is such a thing as a 'real'

ethnicity, the notion of ethnic identity is important in terms of its ability to organise social action. Gilroy supports this conclusion in his comments about race: '"race" must be retained as an analytical category not because it corresponds to any biological or epistemological absolutes, but because it refers investigation to the power that collective identities acquire by means of their roots in tradition' (Gilroy 1987:247).

Inside and outside Limón there are certain ethnically loaded objects and practices that serve as important symbolic markers. These symbols serve to organise identity into discrete ideological categories that are, in the case of Puerto Limón, inevitably defined in terms of black and white. What is interesting about Puerto Limón is its particular history of ethnic inequality, where Afro-Costa Ricans at least at one time wielded a certain amount of power over white Costa Ricans. As the ethnic hierarchy has reversed, it has left the city and the province with a peculiar legacy. The result is the perception of Limón as an 'ethnic' city by Costa Rican outsiders despite its contemporary demographic variety. As will be made clear throughout this analysis, those Costa Rican whites who self-identify as Limonenses are inevitably lumped into the category of 'Limonenses' – an all encompassing identification closely aligned with the amorphous, mysteriously powerful notion of 'blackness' that subsumes any other identity category.

A by-product of this phenomenon is the appropriation of Limonense-ness as a nationally imposed concept of ethnic other-ness by the people of Limón, and implemented not just as a semiotic system of group identification, but as a rallying point for social action rooted in experience. This action is not necessarily political, economic, or any of the other traditional connotations of 'social action' (see Cohen 1974:xvi), but more the everyday action of identity formation played out in creative expression. It is this lived experience of cultural resistance in the development of an aesthetic system that is

the source of power for abstract, reified ideologies of identity.

Minorities in an 'Ethnic' City: Chinese, North Americans, and Los Indios

In the decades following the civil war, many Afro-Costa Ricans emigrated to San José for higher education or to the US for employment, and many Costa Rican whites immigrated to Limón to fill white-collar positions or government posts. Consequently, the ethnic distribution of the city tips slightly in favour of whites who now make up more than half the population. But there is another demographic level beyond the two dominant groups of Afro-Costa Rican and white Costa Rican Limonenses. European and North American missionaries and expatriates, the Chinese, and a few Indigenous groups are an important part of the ethnic mix of modern Puerto Limón, though they remain on the cultural sidelines in the dubious position of minorities in an 'ethnic' city.

The Chinese, who continue to dominate small businesses throughout the city, are the most economically powerful of the smaller ethnic groups in the city and the province. Olien observes that 'while the Chinese are centred in Puerto Limón where they own many of the restaurants, *pulperias* (grocery stores), *cantinas* (bars), movie theatres, and hotels, there is at least one Chinese family in most small communities of the province. The community's commerce is usually dominated by these local Chinese entrepreneurs' (Olien 1977:137). The Chinese finance nearly every large-scale commercial building project in the city of Puerto Limón, and they own the majority of small grocery stores, or pulperias, scattered throughout the suburban barrios. The economic influence of the Chinese does not however correlate to a high level of social interaction with the surrounding community.

Despite the indelible mark their presence has made on the built environment of the city, the social isolationism of the Chinese leads to widespread mistrust by other ethnic groups. One incident that occurred during my fieldwork illustrates the underlying tension between different ethnic groups which occasionally rises to the surface. The mostly Chinese owned and operated small neighbourhood pulperias connect the largely isolationist ethnic group to the wider Limonense population through everyday commerce. I was continually shocked at the deliberately abrasive treatment all sectors of the city gave to the Chinese proprietors of these small general stores. The usual approach was to shout 'Chino!' in a highly pejorative tone, followed by whatever small purchase one required[1]. The targets of what appeared to be an obvious insult invariably seemed passively indifferent. One day the largest pulperia in barrio Roosevelt closed, and never reopened. When I asked some neighbours why, they explained how the Chinese had resisted the rude behaviour of a group of Afro-Costa Rican youth. This group soon returned to smash some display cases with rocks. The response was to close up permanently. Those relating the incident, who genuinely showed disappointment in the behaviour of the Afro-Costa Rican youth, added that the owners of the store owned other stores throughout the city, including an auto parts store in the city centre. The implication was that though the youth were clearly wrong, it was no great loss to the Chinese who could once more take ethnic conflict in stride.

The few North American and Indigenous residents of Limón follow a similar pattern of cultural withdrawal as the Chinese, though this may have more to do with their much lower profile in the market place and their largely impermanent existence in the city than any intentional strategy of withdrawal[2]. Whatever the cause, these smaller ethnic groups remain much like the Afro-Costa Ricans during the cultural transition of

the 1940s, watching as the two dominant groups work out their cultural future. As a result, the process of identity formation in Limón, and as such, the focus of this analysis, hinges on the struggle between Afro-Costa Ricans and white Costa Ricans toward cultural dominance or ethnic synthesis.

Household Structure and the Predicament of Gender

At least part of the conflict between the various ethnic groups of Limón has to do with the level of social integration, particularly in regard to marriage patterns. The Chinese remain one of the most endogamous groups in the city, continuing to import spouses from Hong Kong and Mainland China. The few North American expatriates in Limón have either remained part of close-knit expatriate communities, or married locals with no particular pattern of ethnic preference[3]. The pattern of marriage among white Costa Ricans and Afro-Costa Ricans demonstrates a definite tendency to marry within one's own ethnic group, though the percentage of mixed marriages in my limited survey shows this is by no means strictly enforced (see Appendix A). The tendency for the two dominant groups to marry within their ethnic group does, however, provide opportunity to compare the household structure of white Costa Ricans to Afro-Costa Ricans. This is particularly important in light of the cultural connections between contemporary Afro-Costa Ricans and the Caribbean in general.

Early social research on the Caribbean islands tended to focus heavily on the family structure of post-slavery inhabitants of African decent. The kinship studies by Raymond Smith (1956) and M. G. Smith (1962) both sought to understand the matrifocal kinship structure found in much of the Afro-Caribbean population in light of the

particular context of African descent and the constraints of plantation life. Edith Clarke (1957), in her study of three communities in Jamaica, further elucidated the specific kinship structure found in the Caribbean, and emphasised the role plantation life played in the dominant presence of Afro-Caribbean women in the household.

Many of the writers who have carried out their research in Limón have commented upon the similarities in family structure between Afro-Costa Ricans and Afro-Caribbeans. Hughes (1993) comments on the role of women as agents of socialisation, as well as the higher statistical incidence of female headed households among Afro-Costa Ricans than among white Costa Ricans. Though Purcell criticises past anthropological research in the Caribbean as giving 'more attention to real and imagined mating patterns than they have given to the process and product of domination', he also establishes comparisons between Afro-Costa Ricans and family life in the generalised Caribbean (Purcell 1993:4).

Cathy McIlwaine (1997) offers the most recent research on family structure in Limón. She confirms the links between Afro-Costa Rican households and the Caribbean, but also offers a new perspective on the underlying causes of such typical characteristics as the female-headed household and male emigration. Appropriating the economic concept of vulnerability, McIlwaine explains why Afro-Costa Ricans, long known to enjoy the 'softer' jobs in Limón, should still struggle at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder. According to McIlwaine, 'when race mediates the picture in the context of Limón, Afro-Caribbeans appear to be positioned within "glass boxes" . . . In other words, their movement is restricted both laterally and vertically within "bounded niches"' (McIlwaine 1997:50). This is further complicated by the intersection of gender, which adds another dimension to the ethnic dualism of white versus Afro-Costa Ricans.

Because of the cultural history of female-headed households in the Afro-Caribbean community, Afro-Costa Rican women are less restricted as to their roles in the public sector than white Costa Rican women who remain either in the domestic sphere or part of the informal economy. This affects family structure in that Afro-Costa Rican women do not feel the same pressures to marry as white Costa Rican women.

One interesting by-product of this particular gender dynamic in Limón is the way in which ethnicity is differently valued among men and women. Because women have the added dimension of gender to consider in their calculation of economic survival and potential for upward mobility, they are less concerned than men with the liability of their ethnic affiliation. As feminist writers have long pointed out, in a patriarchal system, men operate outside the established dichotomy (see Bordo 1986; Jay 1990). Just as people of colour in a white dominated society are the only 'ethnics', women in a male dominated society seem to be the only ones with a 'gender' per se. Whiteness and maleness are undefined standards against which all else is defined in terms of the extent of difference. As Henrietta Moore writes: 'Both men and women have to learn to locate themselves in culture, but for men this process is less ambiguous and less contradictory than it is for women. A male individual can identify himself with dominant social values and representations, and essentially there is no contradiction between what is socially valued and his own value as a social individual' (Moore 1986:183).

This manifested itself both verbally and non-verbally throughout my fieldwork. One close friend, who had worked in the office of one of the transnational fruit companies for fifteen years, described how the company continued to import men from San José to fill supervisory roles. She, and at least two other female office workers, felt they knew the operation better, often had more education, and would cost the company

less in terms of relocation than any of the male recruits, but would never be offered the opportunity because they were women. This perspective does not deny women's connection to the same social, political and economic processes that affect ethnic identity. Indeed, part of my friend's frustration was the crucial role English played in the operation of the company, though the imported white Costa Rican executives from San José rarely spoke the language. To her this was an overt offence to her self-identification as Afro-Costa Rican and the valorisation of English as part of that identity. The added insult of being passed over because she was a woman provides a deeper dimension for women to the complexity of identity and conflict in Limón.

This gender dimension plays out in the various expressive forms examined in Part II of this thesis. In all four expressive categories under analysis, gender plays a crucial, yet rarely articulated role in the aesthetic system. The implications of this are two-fold: first, the analysis of identity formation in relation to a Limonense aesthetic system must include the particular predicament of gender differentiation as a mediating influence; and second, that it is through aesthetic expression that women are empowered to affect group identification and mobilisation in ways they are ordinarily denied.

Last Impressions

One of my last experiences in Limón before leaving the field happened to take place at another sporting event. This time my wife, Cheryl, and I stumbled upon a football match in the stadium just across the road from the 'Big Boy' baseball field. She wrote about the experience as part of her continuing series of columns for an English language newspaper in the Central Valley, *The Tico Times*:

The fat lady dances, or rather gyrates, near and against the protective railing that separates us from the field. Men and women yell vulgarities at her. She returns their jeers, laughs, and tosses back her head. She is taunting them.

The soccer players seem to run haphazardly across the tired turf. I cannot tell who the coach is, or if they have one at all. Each play appears foreign to my North American mind; spontaneous, even random.

Suddenly, a loud crack commands the attention of the raucous crowd. As the ball sneaks out of bounds, and a man lays prostrate on the ground, we draw in a corporate gasp. We realise that the frightening noise came from the man's head colliding with another player. The crowd seems not to breathe. He does not move. His yellow and green Limón jersey screams out in contrast to his still, silent body.

While team-mates and unofficial-looking officials surround and survey the man on the ground, I allow my mind and eyes to wander. Flocks of buzzards circle overhead and in the distance, mirroring those who peer down into the face of the fallen man. Young boys run back and forth alongside the railing. None simply play or chase. All sell something: *pati*, *boli*, *beer*. Women stroll in front of me in tight clothes, often only bras and short skirts. They twirl parasols like Victorian madams. Old men in worn white undershirts gesticulate wildly, drink heavily, and occasionally sit silently long enough to watch the game.

Another crowd convenes to the east of the stadium. They laugh, talk and watch the game from a blue stilt house that overlooks the field. The porch sags under their weight, or the scorching sun that beats down on the rusted roof.

The fat lady doesn't seem to mind that everyone teases her. The little boys don't seem to mind that they have to work on a Saturday. The men don't seem to mind if you talk to them during the game. Even the people at the blue house don't seem to mind the heat, or the sagging porch, or that they aren't sitting in the stands.

And then, the man on the ground rises, with a smile and a dance. This reminds the fat lady of her purpose. She pirouettes in a flurry and begins to dance again for the crowd.

The Brasileros, the most famous *comparsa* band, strike up a tune. It draws my attention, gladly, from the gyrating girl-woman as its rhythm seeps into my subconscious; furtively, completely. It begins with the resurrection of the Limonense player. It is triumphant.

I didn't intend to come to a soccer game today. On my way to the grocery store, or to the post office, or to some other seemingly important errand, I heard the roar of the crowd. I put my hand over my brow to shield the sun and saw the Brasileros mid-way through a song. I paid 500 colones for a flimsy pastel paper ticket. They took it at the gate and will probably re-use it for years. I missed out on eggs or stamps, but I witnessed a drama that will remain with me far longer than either. (C. Sharman 1998).

In many ways this experience was not so different from the baseball game described at the beginning of the chapter. There was still that sense of disorganisation bordering on chaos, but there was also a more subtle subtext I could not have grasped the first time. The game had changed from baseball, a holdover of Anglo-North American influence, to football, the national sport of Costa Rica and the unofficial international sport of Latin America. The spectators and players had changed from predominantly Afro-Costa Rican men to include more white Costa Ricans, with at least one woman

dancing her way into the mix. Driving the crowd was the seat-shaking beat of the comparsa band, as if to remind all present who still set the tone in Limón. And all rallied behind the lone Limonense injured out on the field defending the city against the team from the Central Valley. Still, there were some Afro-Costa Ricans on the margins who could only watch from a distance in their old-style wood stilt house, but all in all it was a different game indeed.

Puerto Limón and Ethnicity

Ethnicity is a complex and to some extent unwieldy locus of identity, whether that notion of identity be internally or, more often, externally constructed. Situating its discussion in the shadow of Limón's historical background, I have tried to show the concept of ethnicity as flexible and contingent, though too often it is framed as a euphemism for the biological determinism of a 'racial' category. Eugene Roosens describes 'ethnic identity' as an elastic expression in which 'the dynamic character of the cultural, the social, and the psychological becomes visible in combination; these three dimensions overlap each other and make many nuances possible' (Roosens 1989:19). Still, doubts as to the analytical efficacy of the concept fall flat in the wake of its importance in Limonense experience. 'Real' or not, ethnicity as it is constructed along a black and white continuum affects the daily lives of Limonenses regardless of where they fall along that allegedly imaginary line.

This is particularly important in the local Limonense construction of blackness as a category of experience. As will be discussed in detail in the next chapter, the concept of blackness embodies, in more ways than one, this conflicting dynamic between

conceptual reifications of identity and the actual, lived experience of that identity. I argue that categories of identification, including concepts of ethnicity, race, gender and nationality, are both enacted by and experienced through aesthetic practice. As will be demonstrated, it is in the aesthetic system of value attachment that the dialectical process of identity formation is worked out through perception and expression embodied in experience.

Notes

[1] Most often this came from the lips of children who would shout, 'Chino, boli!' A boli is a tube of flavored ice which was the cheapest way to cool down in the oppressive heat. The startling contrast between small children and the rude, confrontational, 'Chino, boli!' became a constant refrain during the course of my fieldwork.

[2] The impermanence of North Americans in Limón is due mostly to their typical status as temporary relief workers, short-term missionaries, and of course, the occasional anthropologist.

[3] Of the North American expatriates I met during field research, all were Anglo-American equally represented as missionaries, Peace Corps workers and social scientists. Those that decided to stay long term and marry Limonenses did so equally among white Costa Ricans and Afro-Costa Ricans.

Figure 2.1 ~ *As though it were some distant nation, many consider Limón a place apart from the rest of Costa Rica.*

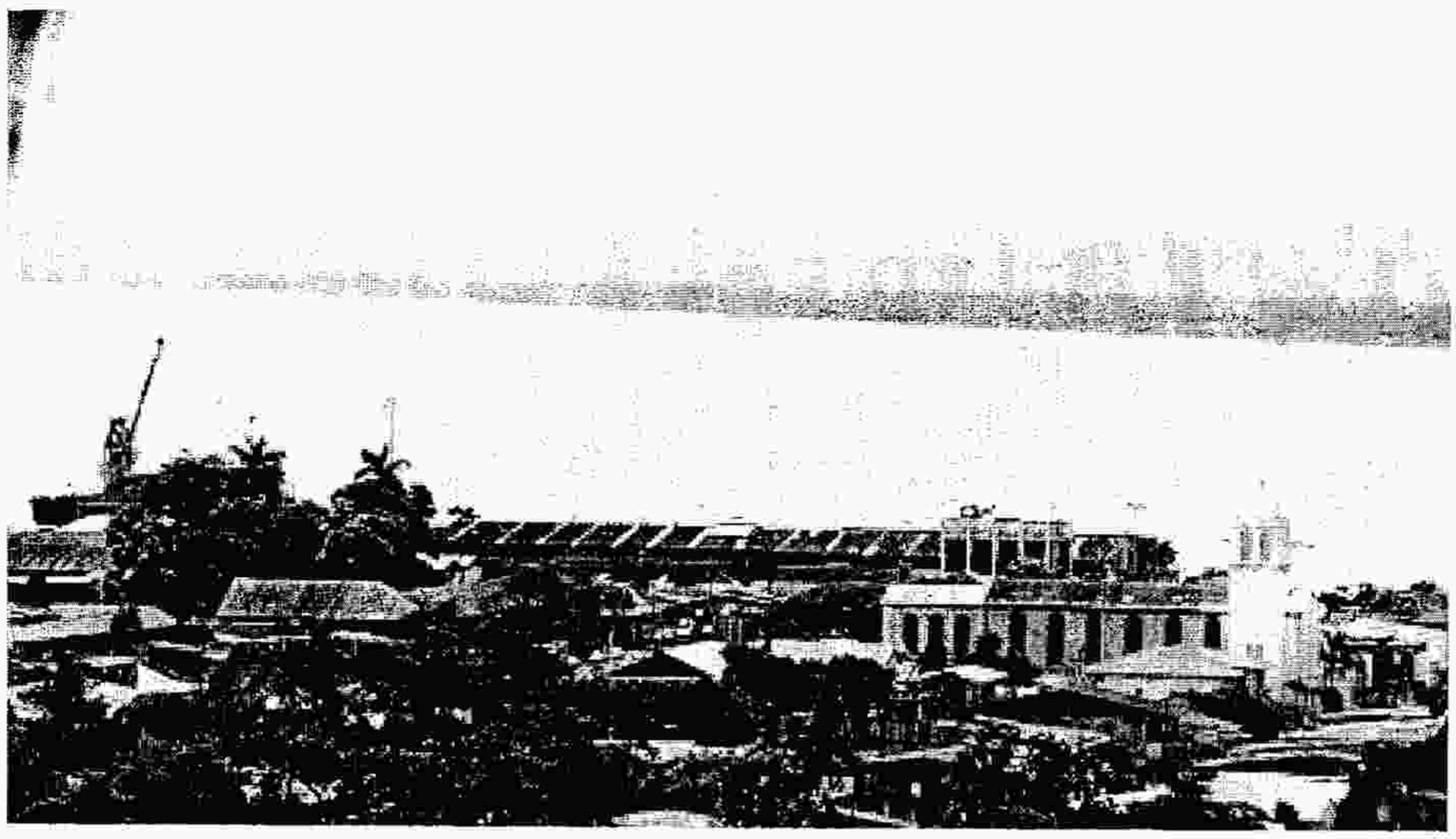
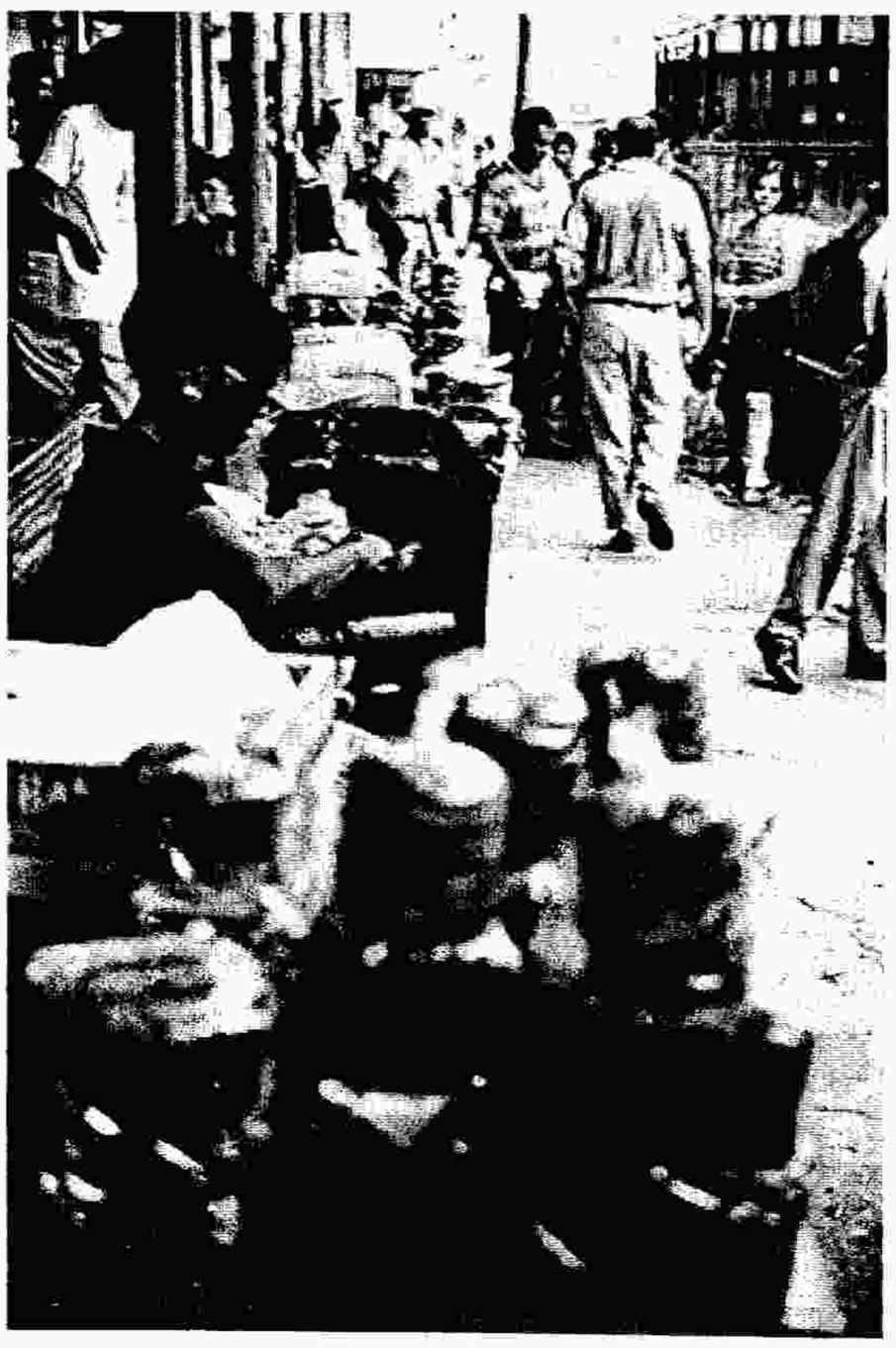


Figure 2.2 ~ *Stepping off the bus in the city centre of Puerto Limón, one is greeted by dozens more bakers selling their wares.*



CHAPTER THREE

PUERTO LIMÓN AND BLACKNESS:
Real and Ideal

'I see myself as black, period. I have no problem with that'.

Miguel sat on the edge of his seat across the long table in the church library. His eyes sparkled behind thick glasses as he spoke of his city and its 'identity crisis'.

'But I grew up in the Creole community, Creole culture, so that's what I knew and that's what I'm identified by'.

He relaxed back into his chair, folded his hands across his chest, and continued, 'Now, the culture is a Caribbean culture, and so for a long time we referred to the coast here as the Central American Caribbean Coast. Matter of fact, it is washed by the Caribbean Sea, though our textbooks say the Atlantic'.

The sparkle returned to his eyes and he laughed, 'There might be a reason for that, but . . .'

Any analysis that hopes to gain some insight into the process of identity formation in Puerto Limón will inevitably confront the issue of blackness. The notion of blackness throughout the Americas evokes not only a purposive social movement aimed at subverting structural inequality but also that amorphous sense of black-ness that envelops discrete articulations of racial identification in favour of a more flexibly inclusive locus of identity rooted in experience. This dual nature of the concept of blackness in the Americas is the source of much of its power to engage the dis-engaged throughout a hemisphere historically prone to social hierarchisation and alienation in the guise of 'democracy'.

This chapter presents a brief overview of blackness in its various manifestations in the Americas followed by a more in-depth analysis of its implementation in Puerto

Limón. The overview focuses predominantly on social research in the Caribbean, as this region figures most prominently in Limón's cultural development. But in some very important ways, the concept of blackness has achieved a more influential role in mainland Latin and North America. As such, these regions will be given separate attention below. The intention is to give the reader some idea of what blackness looks like outside Limón before the particular ethnographic context in question is explored.

Blackness in the Americas

The Caribbean

Early in the history of Caribbean social research, a rather heated debate developed over whether Afro-Caribbeans retained any vestige of African social life (Joel 1972; Simpson and Hammond 1960; Herskovits 1941), or if the trauma of the middle passage created a collective *tabula rasa* upon which Western European culture was inscribed (M. G. Smith 1960). Herskovits (1941), the foremost proponent of African survivals in Caribbean life, argued that the nature of the transplantation of Africans to the Caribbean encouraged a cultural flexibility that incorporated many aspects of tribal life into one amalgamated African culture. Herskovits admitted European influence, but described it as a selectively appropriating process rather than a cultural brainwashing. M. G. Smith (1960) was not as convinced of the cultural survival of 'Africanness', and argued that links to Africa cannot be satisfactorily substantiated. Smith critiqued the concept of one African cultural form, and called for a systematic association between specific cultural practices in the Caribbean with specific African tribes.

Past and present authors have justifiably critiqued the concept of a unified African culture from which the slaves borrowed in the construction of plantation social life (M. G. Smith 1960; Wolf 1982; Mintz 1989). Dathorne, in his analysis of Afro-Caribbean literature, describes the process of this ideological synthesis as generated not by the slaves themselves, but by their white, European owners. According to Dathorne, 'the Hausa, Ibo, Yoruba, or Ashanti who came to the New World was, by the very nature of his passage, no longer Hausa, Ibo, Yoruba, or Ashanti. He was nigger, negro, Negroe, Colored, Quashie, African, Black' (Dathorne 1981:243). The litany of terms generated to justify the enslavement of a particular phenotype created the myth of a unified, homogeneous Africa. Dathorne refers to this process as the first synthesis, including in that the synthesis of British, Dutch, French, and Spanish colonisers into one homogeneous European presence in the New World.

The essentialised, historically constructed notion of two discrete racial and ethnic categories in the Caribbean not only ignores the influence of other ethnic and phenotypic groups, especially the rather large population of East Indians, it also emphasises a homogeneity that does not exist outside of a conceptual ideology. As Dathorne, and M. G. Smith before him, critiques the concept of one 'Africa' lying somewhere across the ocean, Wolf (1982) rightly criticises the perception of an homogeneous Europe. Wolf writes: 'The difficulties of integrating the regional divisions of France and of turning peasants into Frenchmen . . . ; the problems posed by the centrifugal propensities of "invertebrate Spain" . . . ; the obstacles encountered in turning the multiple cities and provinces into "Italians" . . . ; the forging of the individualised and reluctant "home towns" of Germany into one *Reich* . . . ; and the enduring divisions of Britain . . . all call into question . . . European homogeneity' (Wolf 1982:379). This critique of racial and

ethnic homogeneity calls into question the theoretical construct of 'plural societies' in the Caribbean, which is based in part on the assumption of discrete, homogeneous groups living as one society.

The recent historical approach to Caribbean social research, which has called into question the presumed homogeneity of racial and ethnic categories, has important implications for the analysis of class conflict and race relations. In many ways, writers are faced with a moral dilemma as to whether to stress heterogeneity, and therefore an implied progression toward assimilation and a unified culture, or homogeneity, and therefore an implied progression toward segregation in the pursuit of a nationalist or racist ideology. Rowlands (1994), writing about social formation in general, argues for the perspective that cultures originate in diversity and are perpetually moving toward homogeneity. He refutes the concept of 'natural' cultures which form hybridised communities through contact, and emphasises the underlying hybrid nature of all so-called homogeneous social groups. He further argues that we must 'choose whether we wish to stress roots or routes in the forging of cultural identities' (Rowlands 1994:49). Dathorne, though intent on establishing the importance of 'Afro New World Man's' literature in the construction of identity, is also wary of emphasising discrete categories like 'Mulatto,' 'Black' or 'White.' For Dathorne such socially constructed terms avoid what he calls the 'final secondary synthesis when Black and White cease to exist. Instead, a new type of fraud is created - one in which White standards become operative' (Dathorne 1981:263). Morner also supports the move to a more 'democratic society' which would make 'racial affiliation increasingly unimportant,' (Morner 1967:148) but he supports the complexity of terminology to achieve that goal. He writes that 'as long as

this nomenclature remains complex, ethnic discrimination will be difficult to carry into effect, even though prejudice is not lacking' (Morner 1967:148).

Whether or not discrimination is difficult to carry out, the fact that prejudice remains at all leads many writers to stress the cultural homogeneity of Afro-Caribbeans in the pursuit of a unified, and separate, Black culture in the Caribbean. Peter Wilson (1973) clearly emphasises such a view in his work on Providencia, and Dathorne, though hopeful for the final secondary synthesis, seeks a Black cultural identity, and by implication, an historical dignity, through Caribbean literature. For Purcell (1993), the socially constructed nature of racial distinction did not change the very real experience of discrimination which influenced his analysis of the formation of an Afro-Costa Rican identity. Bourgois (1989), in his work on Limón, argues for a conceptual link between ideology and material reality when dealing with racial, ethnic and class conflict. For him, history forms ethnic and racial categories, and regardless of what they 'really' are theoretically, they affect people on a daily, phenomenological basis.

The question of whether to stress 'roots' or 'routes' in Caribbean social development has important implications for any study of the region concerned with cultural forms. The research is inevitably faced with the problem of where to draw the lines of cultural origin, since 'a culture' is really a 'series of processes that construct, reconstruct, and dismantle cultural materials in response to identifiable determinants' (Wolf 1982:387). The tendency in most studies of specifically Afro-Caribbean cultural forms is to stress the heterogeneity of influence, which has produced a homogeneity of expression. Thus, Duncan and Melendez (1972), in their work on Limón, trace the historical development of various cultural practices of Afro-Costa Ricans. Abrahams, arguing against the idea of a completely de-cultured slave, criticises the notion that 'the

group that dominates politically will also prevail culturally' (Abrahams 1983:40). He further asserts that 'African sensibilities were the starting place and . . . European values were selectively adapted to the specialised needs of Afro-Americans' (Abrahams 1983:54).

This approach to Caribbean research has encouraged the definition of a discrete cultural category consisting of inhabitants of African descent and characterised by innovation and semiotic flexibility. Mintz describes 'the glory of Afro-Americana' as depending 'on creativity and innovation far more than on the indelibility of particular cultural contents' (Mintz 1989:14). Abrahams supports this view, and describes the Afro-American aesthetic, and by implication Afro-American social organisation, as dependent on its 'ability to contend with opposing and competing forces and to keep the contest going indefinitely' (Abrahams 1983:xxx). He views Afro-American verbal performance as a manifestation of a more general Afro-American culture that constantly seeks to bring order out of chaos through innovation and creativity: 'the good speechmaker does not really feel that his talents have been demonstrated unless he is able to contend in the midst of noise, thus giving order to random sound' (Abrahams 1983:38). Purcell agrees, and argues that Afro-Americans' 'saving grace is the flexibility so ably enacted through value transaction; it allows them not only to survive, but advance in a creative response to this disfigurement' (Purcell 1993:159). This concept of Afro-Americana as a cultural category that is defined by its flexibility inches toward a middle ground between the homogeneous/heterogeneous ends of the Caribbean categorical continuum.

Mainland America

The various manifestations of blackness in mainland America as a whole are so numerous and complex that any attempt to lump them all together in a short overview would be not only foolhardy but also unfair to the dynamically creative flexibility of the concept to adapt to disparate contexts. Suffice it to say that Whitten and Torres (1998) confined their recent overview to just Latin America and the Caribbean and still managed a two volume anthology. Still, there remains some important aspects of black experience in mainland America that bear some introduction.

One of the most important differences between the insular Caribbean and mainland America is the migratory history of Afro-Americans within and between the two regions. Much of mainland America, particularly Central America, is part of a second stage migration within the history of the African diaspora. After the abolition of slavery in the islands, waves of emigration carried thousands of Afro-Caribbean wage labourers to the canal zone in Panama and the fruit plantations of transnational corporations in Central and South America. Later, after World War II, a booming global economy recruited another wave of Afro-Caribbean labourers to Britain, Canada and the United States. These pockets of Afro-Caribbean settlement were creating a new history of displacement that was fundamentally different from their enslaved predecessors. As such, this second stage population movement may best be described as a Caribbean diaspora, where the cultural syntheses and transformations that the middle passage inscribed on Afro-Caribbeans were carried to the mainland as a part of a new chapter in migration.

In some contexts, the new Caribbean immigrant was writing the first chapter in the history of blackness for a particular region, but more often, new immigrants were moving in next to Afro-Americans who had their own long history of repression tied to the landscape. Again, the differences in the two contexts are important. In places like Colombia, Ecuador and the United States, new Caribbean immigrants entered a world already charged with the legacy of colonial slavery in the politics of race and hierarchical division. As such, blackness is a more consciously articulated concept in these contexts. Elsewhere, as in Costa Rica, the articulation of blackness would take longer to form.

In the last two decades, blackness as a socio-political movement has achieved higher visibility throughout the Americas, due in large part to the advances in global communication and the media. Paul Gilroy advances the notion of a modern transnational black identity in his controversial book, *The Black Atlantic*. Building his argument on the cross-cultural links in black music and literature, Gilroy asserts a unified blackness for the original African diaspora, which includes all of Afro-America and parts of Europe. Though Gilroy admits of some 'awkward issues' like 'the unity and differentiation of the creative black self' and the 'vexed matter of black particularity', he claims there is a 'playful diasporic intimacy that has been a marked feature of transnational black Atlantic creativity' (Gilroy 1993:80,xi).

Gilroy anticipates the critique of essentialism and admirably maintains his position, but it raises the issue of the nature of blackness in general. Any formulation of a unified black identity must be able to step outside the cultural hegemony of North America and Western Europe and confront the drastically different context found in Latin America where much of the so-called black Atlantic resides.

The 'awkward issue' of black particularity in Gilroy's theory of a unified black identity is crucial to the development of a wieldy theorisation of blackness. It is in the particular ethnographic contexts that difference and sameness in black experience can be grasped more fully, especially when that experience is situated in the particular cultural history of Latin America as opposed to Anglo-North America or Western Europe.

Whitten and Torres have attempted just that in their recent anthology, *Blackness in Latin America and the Caribbean*. Whitten and Torres situate black experience in a nationalist context and as part of ethnic-blocs that develop in response to exclusion from a particular national context. Inherent in these ethnic-blocs are the powers of identity and representation which come into play when non-white, usually indigenous or black, people 'are ethnically disfranchised from full participation in the dominant society' (1998:8).

Whitten and Torres focus on the concept of *negritude* as 'the positive features of blackness among people classed as, or self-identifying as, "black"' (1998:7), which, within an ethnic-bloc context, is 'profoundly populist and rejecting of nonblackness as a criterion for sophisticated self-awareness' (1998:9). Since its appearance in the literature of Aimé Césaire, *negritude* has been keenly aware of the political arena, where identity is deployed in the rhetoric of self-identification. This is particularly important in a national context where identity is created and applied by the elite. The resultant myth of a 'racial democracy', where all racial distinction is subsumed by the ideology of *mestizaje*, or intermixture, denies non-elite, usually non-white, groups access to the mechanisms of self-identification.

This is one area where much of Latin America differs distinctly from North America and Western Europe. To use the most obvious examples, the United States and England maintain strict and overt lines of racial division based primarily on the binary

opposition of black and white (see Gilroy 1987; West 1993; Marx 1998). As such, the articulation of blackness accesses a racial discourse already underway from the earliest beginnings of the nation-state. In much of Latin America, those groups that are excluded from the national context and forced into ethnic-blocs have to create their own discourse of 'ethnic' experience, whether that be black, indigenous or Asian. Inevitably this creative effort draws on the well-publicised presentation of blackness from the United States, but it also incorporates a more indigenously Latin American perspective. This might mean political alliances with indigenous groups (Whitten and Torres 1998), or an emphasis on miscegenation (Price 1983; Bateman 1998).

Whitten and Torres place the dynamic of blackness, and more specifically, *negritude*, in the context of a socio-political movement toward self-determination. Two prominent Afro-Latin American proponents of a politicised blackness stated their 'movements were not "against the state". Rather, they sought to create ethnic space for blackness as a creative cultural quality within their respective nations' (Whitten and Torres 1998:34). Still, Whitten and Torres 'anticipate that black-based ethnic-bloc formations will use the ideology of *negritude* and, in so doing, will be perceived as a threat to nationalist sovereignty and nationalist territoriality' (1998:8).

Peter Wade offers a broader and less overtly politicised view of blackness in his work concerning Colombia (Wade 1993). Wade's emphasis is on the racial order created within the nationalist context of Colombia, and how that plays out in inter-regional migration, economic development, cultural geography, music and other expressive forms, as well as the political arena. Wade's more holistic approach to the subject of blackness emphasises the power of social practice to make racist ideological constructs experientially 'real' to blacks in Colombia. The underlying objective is to 'emphasise the

embeddedness of racial dynamics in contexts of social relations and look at sets of circumstances in which the racial order is structured in different ways by local conditions' (Wade 1993:43).

Wade's emphasis on cultural forms to access the social process of identity formation among blacks in Colombia demonstrates the regional differences that can occur within a national context. This is particularly applicable in Colombia where two very different Afro-American populations occupy two separate stretches of coastline. As it highlights the role of social practice in the formulation of racist ideology, his work also points to the way blackness may be constructed differently throughout the African and Caribbean diasporas.

More recently, Jean Muteba Rahier (1998) has taken a similar perspective into his analysis of blackness in Ecuador. Rahier resists 'considering blackness as essentialised identity', opting instead 'for a concept of self as a fragmented and problematic identity' (Rahier 1998:421). His work focuses on the cultural geography of Ecuador and the intimacy between constructions of self and the landscape. As Wade, Rahier and others take the idea of blackness or *negritude* into the everyday social practices of excluded ethnic-blocs in Latin America, the process of identity formation becomes more clearly 'fragmented and problematic' than simply ascribing to an essentialised ideal. Without abandoning the empowerment of ideology to challenge hegemonic repression, this approach reveals how that ideology intersects with everyday practice where (dis)empowerment is most keenly felt.

Blackness in Puerto Limón

Building on the work outlined above, I now turn to the specific case of Puerto Limón and its tenuous relationship to the concept of blackness. Though he may be overstating the case, Phillipe Bourgois claims: 'were it not for phenotypically based discrimination, Blacks would probably no longer exist as a distinct ethnic group in Costa Rica' (Bourgois 1998:128). The fact that discrimination does exist, though vociferously denied by most of Costa Rica, has served to organise Afro-Costa Ricans into what Whitten and Torres would describe as an ethnic-bloc. But the articulation of blackness, sometimes locally referred to as *negritude*, or 'black attitude', is also the product of internal processes which may have continued without the racism of white Costa Rica. Part of this process is the experiential transformation of blackness as an ideology of Afro-Costa Rican identity to a more amalgamated and malleable notion of Caribbean-ness or *La Limonense* which applies inter-ethnically and at different levels according to an individual's attachment to the material and cultural environment. Crucial to this experiential transformation is the cultural aesthetic system made up of various cultural forms through which ideological claims are filtered in Limonense experience.

Racism and the Impetus for Ideology

In the spirit of understatement, one of the most important factors in understanding the particular dynamic of identity in Limón is the numerical dominance of white Costa Ricans in the wake of the civil war. This shift in the ethnic composition of the city produced an identity crisis among Afro-Costa Ricans, and as Trevor Purcell points out,

'many of the symbols of prestige [are] now drawn from Hispanic [white] culture' (Purcell 1993:51). Their influence is visible in the gradual disappearance of English from the Afro-Costa Rican vocabulary, the transformation of Limón architecture from the typical Caribbean wood stilt house to the concrete dwellings of central Costa Rica, and even the incorporation of Costa Rican foods and traditions into the holiday celebrations of Afro-Costa Ricans. A local church minister illustrates the accompanying internalisation of the new racial hierarchy:

> You have black youth in Limón who go to San José and if they see another black person coming down the street facing them, they cross over. They may know who it is, but they cross over because they don't want the other people to see them associating with the others. For me that's serious, but it's a way to seek acceptance by the broader society, the stronger social group.

The cultural force exerted by that 'stronger social group' of Costa Rican whites destabilises the cultural claim Afro-Costa Ricans strive to maintain on Limón even as it reinforces the racist notion of Limón as a black province despite demographic evidence to the contrary. The same Afro-Caribbean minister who described the embarrassment of Afro-Costa Rican youth in San José, said that although he was Nicaraguan by birth, immigration officers in the capital city never bothered to check his papers: 'The assumption is, if you're black, you're from Limón.' He went on to complain 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!"' The constant theme in each response is the impression that Limón is still a black province.

This phenomenon is common to much of 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 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).

This persistent conceptual association between Limón and its Afro-Costa Rican population creates an equally persistent ideology of blackness among 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. As 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', a place apart that is as feared as it is romanticised for its exotic cuisine and cultural practices.

This perception of difference exacerbates an already strained inter-ethnic relationship in the national socio-political environment. Many whites in Costa Rica perceive their economic, political, and educational systems as open and equitable for all those determined enough to take advantage of the opportunities. This perception is at odds with Afro-Costa Rican experience which maintains that not only are these systems many times closed to those in other ethnic groups, but the national culture of denial precludes rational debate about racism and ethnic prejudice. The long-time president of

the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in Puerto Limón explains: 'There's racism, discrimination here - just like in the States - but here it's worse. In the States it's outside, here it's inside. In the States they'll say "get out of here, we don't want you round here". Here they'll say "come on in", but once you're in they tell you you're worthless'. A local Afro-Costa Rican minister articulates a similar opinion: 'Now its [racism] very subtle, but it makes it more dangerous. If you can see it, you can fight against it. But it is so subtle, many people accept and digest it without even knowing that it is . . . and reproduce it too'. Noted Afro-Costa Rican author, Quince Duncan, echoes this impression. He explains that many whites question the large emigration of Afro-Costa Ricans to the United States, 'and I notice that in the States, you have people who hate you, the people who couldn't care less, and those who love you. So you can draw a line, these are your friends, these don't care if you die or live, and these guys would shoot you if they could'. For Duncan and many other Afro-Costa Ricans, there is no clear target for social indictment when it comes to racist perceptions and their effects, leaving many to impotently decry injustice with little effective recourse.

The evidence tends to confirm this impression. Many Costa Rican whites readily assert typical racial stereotypes, yet deny racism exists. '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 elaborate on the violent crime, drugs, and poverty that 'lazy blacks' perpetuate, and in the same breath assure 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'. The quote belies the fact that an insidiously subtle racism does exist within the white majority of the national socio-political

environment.

Beyond the anecdotal evidence of individual opinions, the print media have overtly and tacitly substantiated the accusation of a racist ideology prevalent in Costa Rica. Within white authored literature, racial stereotypes run rampant, especially in the body of work to come out of Limón in the 1970s when communism found a reluctant champion in the Afro-Costa Rican workers of the banana plantations (see Chapter Seven). Newspapers also perpetuate racist stereotypes of Limón and her people with news stories that highlight drug activity in the province that is equal to or lesser than other, more demographically white, provinces.

The product of the overall perception of difference and the subtle, and not so subtle, forms of racism directed at the province, and more specifically the city of Puerto Limón, is a Limonense identity based on an essentialist notion of 'blackness' that, ironically, permeates every ethnic group in Limón. As the Afro-Costa Rican community organises behind an ideology of blackness predicated on an essentialist notion of a racial category, the rest of the city submits to its cultural hegemony. An important part of Puerto Limón's embrace of the label 'black city' is the production of cultural institutions to perpetuate the ideal.

The UNIA, Negro Day and Carnaval

One of the most active Afro-Costa Rican organisations is still the Universal Negro Improvement Association started by Marcus Garvey in the early part of this century. Ironically, the UNIA, as the last operational office of the once thriving international association, is the centre of controversy among Afro-Costa Ricans. Many feel the

association is inflexible and outdated, maintaining its cultural hegemony over the community by sheer weight of its historical longevity and the hero status of its mainly elderly governing body.

Despite, or perhaps because of, this criticism, the UNIA remains the focal point for the essentialist notion of black identity in Puerto Limón. Seeking an anchor point in the complex social milieu of Limón, the UNIA and its members strive to maintain the foundational claim of the Afro-Costa Rican population on the cultural identity of the city, if not the entire province, of Limón. As an overt strategy of cultural resistance, the UNIA has successfully engaged the cultural encroachment of white Costa Ricans by emphasising an idealised image upon which to build intra-ethnic, specifically Afro-Costa Rican, solidarity. As a model for social cohesion across ethnic boundaries, their efforts serve to concretise the essentialist image of blackness in a way that all Limonenses can respond to its claims. Negro Day and *Carnaval*, two cultural institutions initiated by the UNIA, offer important insight into this dual role, revealing how the politics of race and ideology participate in the formation of collective identity in Limón.

Negro Day

Negro Day began as part of an international initiative on the part of the global Universal Negro Improvement Association after a summit meeting in New York. Alfred King, president of the Limón office of the UNIA for the past four decades, explains: 'A long time ago there was a conference up in New York and they decided to have a day just for the Negro. Costa Rica has September 15, Independence Day, but the Negro didn't have anything. So they make Negro Day, August 30'. The August date refers to the Black

Costa Rican Day established during the conference for race issues in Costa Rica in 1978. Though thirty years separated the conference and the nationalisation of Afro-Caribbeans, King expresses the persistent experience of exclusion when he refers to the national Independence Day as a day for Costa Ricans, but 'the Negro didn't have anything'.

The response was a day to celebrate blackness in Puerto Limón. The celebration, which started out as a series of events held at the UNIA building, spread to a city-wide holiday each year at the end of August. Most churches and schools hold their own brand of celebrations that vary from Afro-Costa Rican food fairs to music and drama performances.

Organisers still hold the main event of Negro Day at the landmark UNIA building in downtown Puerto Limón. The building, known affectionately as the Black Star Line after Marcus Garvey's shipping company, boasts a large meeting hall reserved for Afro-Costa Rican social functions and UNIA meetings. Perched on the second floor of the turquoise wooden building, above a Caribbean food restaurant and Alfred King's barber shop, the Black Star Line meeting hall is a fitting venue for the UNIA sponsored Negro Day celebration (see Figures 3.1 and 3.2).

The 1997 celebration opened with a prayer, followed by several hymns and patriotic songs. The meeting progressed with various speakers, both planned and spontaneous, who extolled the activities of the UNIA or reminisced as to the days long past of Puerto Limón and her Afro-Caribbean population. Christian hymns sung by the audience and special musical presentations interspersed the speeches throughout the event. Finally, a keynote speaker orated from the stage, followed by a few words from UNIA President Alfred King and a lunch of typical Caribbean fare.

The structure and content of the UNIA Negro Day celebration is an important illustration of how the rhetoric of blackness fits into the cultural milieu of Puerto Limón. Language, race, and religion are all used effectively in the context of the event to reinforce the essentialised ideal of black identity.

Language, especially in the complex ethnic context of Puerto Limón, is an important piece in the identity puzzle. Since the first settling of the province, language has served as an important levelling device among the disparate ethnic groups. Afro-Caribbean labourers disparaged Spanish as a 'bird language', and lauded their native English as the symbol of culture and sophistication. It also placed Afro-Caribbean labourers at a distinct advantage over Costa Ricans in dealing with North American plantation managers. All of this changed after the civil war, when schools were nationalised to exclude English, and the bureaucracy of national government, along with its accompanying reliance on Spanish, extended into every aspect of Limón life. This left generations of Afro-Costa Ricans scrambling to assimilate Spanish as the new key to economic survival.

Throughout the UNIA celebration, the only Spanish spoken was in the national anthem of Costa Rica, the singing of which illustrates the ambiguity of the Afro-Costa Rican relationship to the rest of the nation. One speaker in particular, a Limonense educator, explained: 'We are the people that are least proud of our identity, because . . . if you go where the Chinese are, they are speaking Chinese to their children . . . but we, the Afro-Caribbeans, are speaking Spanish to our children. What a disadvantage. . . . Let us try to rescue this'. Though the audience supported the educator's view, the keynote speaker, during his address, challenged his position: 'English is not my language! English is the language that I use to communicate with my surrounders [*sic*]. English is

my working language. Spanish is my working language. I have lost my language because they stole it from me! So I have to adopt another man's tongue to communicate with my brothers!' The overall theme implied a general insecurity within the Afro-Costa Rican community in regard to language. To de-emphasise English is to submit to the language of power in the national context, but to emphasise English is to legitimate the ancestral experience of slavery as the bedrock of a collective identity. Caught in the middle of this dilemma, the keynote speaker succinctly illustrated the crux of the Limón identity crisis. Like most contexts of displacement, they are a people with a limited history, and that applies to all the ethnic groups of Limón. It is no surprise that this crisis is most acute for Afro-Costa Ricans who represent a second stage diaspora, twice removed from any notion of historical place or homeland. The UNIA celebration of Negro Day offers an opportunity to verbalise the collective insecurity over language and its role in creating that longed-for sense of place in Puerto Limón.

Along with this focus on language, the UNIA Negro Day celebration emphasised an essentialist notion of discrete racial categories that go beyond ethnic distinctions based on collective experience to strike at a more abstract, ideal type of group identity. In this case it was a collective rationalisation of phentotype as the qualifying characteristic of Afro-Costa Rican identity despite the myriad vectors of experience that may inform identity formation within so complex an ethnic environment.

The discursive rationalisation of this ideal blackness around which Afro-Costa Ricans were encouraged to rally was most evident in the keynote speaker's address. The speaker contextualised black identity in the biblical account of Noah and the flood, distinguishing the origins of each 'race' as attached to the progeny of Noah. As the Jews are children of Shem, the Gentiles children of Jephath, so all Blacks are the children of

Ham. This racial essentialism, rationalised in the legitimating influence of religion, forms the foundation for an appeal to difference based not on experience, but on the abstract ideals of discrete racial categories. As the speaker concluded his summary of ethno-genesis through Abraham, the audience was left with an incongruous taxonomy that posits the discrete categories of Jews, Gentiles, Blacks, and Arabs. The origin myth presented conflated religious distinction with racial distinction with the implication that the two are synonymous. The speaker elucidated this categorical conflation further when he raised the issue of the true race of the Messiah, implying that as a human category in the taxonomy of possible identities, blacks are a people apart both in origin and in relationship to their Creator.

The socio-political implications of this kind of essentialist rhetoric are many-fold. By denying the varied experience inherent in a complex, multi-ethnic community, an ideology of blackness based on racial essentialism denies the flexible and multi-faceted character of the Caribbean diaspora. As Paul Gilroy points out, '. . . the idea that there is a fixed, invariant, and essential Black identity that can be held constant . . . [is] a symptom of confusion and inertia, in that it colludes in the privatisation of Black culture, and sunders it from its historic association with social change' (Gilroy 1995:16-17). Identity is forged on the bedrock of experience, and to forsake experience for the ephemera of abstract essentialism is to deny an authentic, workable foundation for a collective, cohesive cultural identity for Afro-Costa Ricans and Limonenses in general. All of which leaves the keynote speaker's appeal to an essentialist black identity as 'little more than an alibi for racial narcissism and a license for ethnic absolutism' (Gilroy 1995:17).

The religious justification for this 'racial narcissism' goes beyond the keynote

speaker's address. From the opening hymn, the event took on a liturgical format that lent something of the sacred to the proceedings. The first few songs, most of which were Protestant hymns taken directly from church hymnals, were followed by an invocation, a few announcements, some more hymns, special music presentations, and finally the 'sermon' delivered by the keynote speaker. This mimesis of Protestant liturgy provided an experiential anchor to the ideological content of the meeting, and served to legitimate the somewhat abstract concepts of identity presented to the mostly Protestant audience. By posing the issues of black identity in a liturgical format, the Negro Day celebration ensured some level of connection for those present.

The UNIA celebration of Negro Day at the Black Star Line illustrates the often conscious implementation of an essentialised blackness, which strikes at the exposed nerve of Limón's identity crisis, but seems to miss the mark of everyday Limonense experience. The disparity between the ideology of blackness and everyday experience was apparent in the relatively low turnout of the UNIA sponsored event and in the wider celebration of Negro Day throughout Limón. Outside the walls of the Black Star Line, the celebration that took place 'on the street' not only illustrates the less categorical experience of Afro-Costa Ricans, but also the multi-ethnic identification with the 'black' celebration. Two Negro Day events in particular provide insight into this experiential disparity, the First Baptist Church food fair and a local poetry reading.

The First Baptist Church, established before the turn of the century by British missionaries, remains one of the anchor points in the Protestant community along with the Methodist and Anglican churches. In celebration of Negro Day, the church sponsored a Caribbean food fair that promised authentic Afro-Costa Rican food for a small fee. The day arrived with church volunteers busily stewing turtle fin and *bofé* (cow's lung), as well

as the traditional *sopa de mondongo*, a soup of vegetables and tripe. The turn out was low, but many raved about the old-fashioned dishes as much for the memories of a more traditionally Caribbean youth as for the actual taste of the food. In fact, quite a few remarked, mostly in Spanish, how seldom they prepare such dishes in Limón today.

What distinguished this small gathering of church members from the UNIA event was the conscious nostalgia of the experience. The celebration of Afro-Costa Rican cooking was not presented as an attempt to rescue those foods which captured the spirit of black identity in Limón. It was a recognition of the foundational Caribbean influence on Limón that has receded over the generations into the multi-ethnic milieu of the city, notably illustrated in the snatches of Spanish used to praise the *sopa de mondongo* and *bofé con yuca.*

Another, less formal, celebration of Negro Day took place in a local art gallery where four to five poets gathered to share their work. Vera Beatriz opened the gallery as the fulfilment of a long-time interest in art, especially art of Limón. A painter and a poet, Vera moved to Limón with her family at a young age like many of the Costa Rican whites who now call the city home. As one of several local art patrons, Vera enthusiastically supports exhibitions of local talent like the Negro Day poetry reading held at her gallery. The most notable distinction between her poetry reading and the UNIA celebration, was the fact that only one of those present was Afro-Costa Rican.

During the informal discussion before the reading, many of those present complained about the deterioration of certain traditional celebrations, such as the annual Carnaval. They also discussed how they felt connected to the Negro Day celebration as white Limonenses, claiming that every day in Limón is Negro Day, just as every day is Chinese Day, or White Day. Hidden in the seemingly universal rhetoric of dominant

groups concerning the cultural claims of minority groups, there was recognition, and even celebration, of the formative influence of Afro-Costa Ricans. There was also a challenge to the conceptual hegemony of black identity over the city of Limón which excludes the contribution of other ethnic groups.

In both the Baptist Church food fair and the poetry reading there is evidence of an experiential gap between the ideology of black identity in Limón and the phenomenological understanding of Limonense identity. The gap is evident in many of the celebrations surrounding Negro Day, including the formative event held at the UNIA, all of which point to a collective negotiation of identity taking place among Limonenses that no longer looks to Afro-Costa Rican experience as the only legitimate Limonense experience.

Carnaval

Another important implementation of black identity is the annual Limón Carnaval[1]. In the turbulent 1940s, as thousands of young Limonenses left Limón in search of employment, many stumbled across the Afro-Caribbean heritage they had until then only heard about from their parents and grandparents. Exposed to Carnaval in Panama during this time, Alfred King was inspired to bring back what he interpreted as a celebration of blackness to the fragile ethnic context of Limón. King returned to Puerto Limón in 1949 and organised the city's first Carnaval celebration around an existing October holiday.

While Carnaval seemed the ideal cultural event around which Limonenses could organise, it was in some ways incompatible with the particular historical and social context of Limón. The ideological appropriation of the event did not take into account

three important factors in the performance of Carnaval throughout most of the Americas: a history of slavery in the region; a common Catholic heritage; and an Afro-American, or at least non-white, majority in the population.

The first distinction between Limón and other parts of the Americas that celebrate Carnaval lies in the origin of the Afro-American population. In other areas, the core group of celebrants consists of an ex-slave population in continuous habitation of the land. As discussed in other examinations of Carnaval, this lends importance to the role reversal aspect of the celebration (Miller 1994; DeMatta 1991). The usually large population of ex-slaves and their descendants participate in a liberating ritual through Carnaval, a re-appropriation of the land toiled under slavery and a temporary reversal of the ethnic hierarchy that is its legacy.

The Afro-American population of Limón is part of a Caribbean diaspora of migrant labourers, which constitutes a radical shift in the historical and social motivations of the primary diaspora out of Africa. To be sure, permanent effects of that primary diaspora do exist, and in many ways the mass migrations out of the Caribbean islands in the late nineteenth century were involuntary themselves. The point here is that though these labourers shared a common history of slavery, Limón was not associated with that history in the same way as Brazil, Trinidad, or New Orleans. In fact, before the civil war, many Afro-Caribbean labourers in Limón enjoyed seniority over their white Costa Rican counterparts because of their English language skills and largely British citizenship (Purcell 1993; Bourgois 1989). Though this changed radically after 1948, the admittedly difficult social environment that arose could not equal the legacy of slavery that fuels much of the cultural significance of Carnaval elsewhere.

The second distinction lies in the religious base of the community in Puerto Limón. By the time Carnaval began in Limón, the Protestant churches formed the religious foundation of the city. Without the Catholic basis for Carnaval, the celebration lacked an important aspect of its permanence in other regions. As the celebration marking the beginning of Lent, Carnaval is rooted in the legitimising institution of the Catholic Church. Though often played out as a rebellion against the constricting morality of the Church, the enthusiasm of Carnaval's opposition depends on the dominance of Catholicism the rest of the year. In Limón, the Protestant faith remains dominant, and has no part in Carnaval. In fact, Alfred King consciously sought to distance the event from its usual religious association with Lent: 'The one in February is a religious holiday. Ash Wednesday, Ash Friday [*sic*]. I didn't want any of that, so I picked Race Day [Columbus Day in mid-October]'. Without that religious anchor, Carnaval began with rather shallow roots as a cultural institution.

The final important distinction lies in the sheer number of participants. In other Carnaval settings, the Afro-American populations far outnumber any other ethnic group (with the possible exception of Trinidad where East Indians constitute a large portion of the population). In these settings, the Afro-Caribbean population, once combined with all other groups, boasts numbers in the millions (Gill 1997; Cowley 1996). Limón, though once a predominantly Afro-Caribbean city, had by the time of the civil war seen a mass emigration of Afro-Caribbean labourers in search of work. After the civil war this only worsened as Costa Rican whites flooded into the city for government and white-collar jobs. Today Limón is more than half white, with Afro-Costa Ricans making up only 35 to 40% of the population. Not only is the city not predominantly Afro-Costa Rican, the entire population does not number more than 60,000. The result is a setting that simply

does not have the numbers to maintain cultural control over the celebration of Carnaval as an expression of black identity.

These three distinctions between Limón and other areas that celebrate Carnaval set the stage for an experiential transformation of the event from its original conception as an expression of blackness. One of the most oft-heard comments during Carnaval concerns how the celebration has changed since it began in 1949. The overall structure of Carnaval today is very similar to smaller town festivals called *ferias* that take place throughout the year in other parts of Costa Rica. As Alfred King himself comments, '[Carnaval] could be any feria anywhere now'. The commercialisation of the event brings thousands of Costa Rican whites to Puerto Limón each October for a week of revelry that focuses much more on food and drink than on Afro-Costa Rican culture. Of the lengthy list of Afro-Costa Rican cultural events planned by a community-appointed commission, only a handful actually take place. In fact, most of the food vendors that arrive for the week sell typical Costa Rican foods, and only a handful of vendors, mostly on the outskirts of town, offer foods typical of Afro-Costa Ricans. The vendors lease space around the central market for temporary shelters, known as *chinamos*, that provide everything from alcohol, to video games, to dance halls.

One Afro-Costa Rican woman commented on a recent trip to Trinidad for their annual Carnaval celebration. She explained: 'Now that is a Carnaval. You don't see any of these chinamos at all. It really feels like a Caribbean Carnaval . . . I really wish some of them could come over here and see this, and maybe show them how to do it right.' She went on to say that 'the cultural part of Carnaval is long past. It's just a way to make money now. Some of those chinamos cost 6 million colones [approximately 15,000 British pounds], and they pay it because they know they will make a lot of money'.

The deterioration of the cultural significance of Carnaval provokes biting cynicism from at least one of Limón's most famous authors. For Afro-Costa Rican poet Eulalia Bernard, Carnaval is now little more than an opportunity for Costa Rican whites to go 'slumming' among the Limonenses: 'Carnaval, / Let's go see the Negroes jump, / for the work we are not going to give them . . . / Carnaval / Sweat, enchant, vomit your grief, / drag your chains with rhythm' (Bernard 1982: 39-40). This same cynicism is also apparent in her poem, *El Carnaval*: 'Dance, dance! / Little black children / mix-bloods, Indians, / bronze-skinned children. / What whores! / Anyway / the sea will carry / all of this away / Carnaval / Carnaval! / Dance, dance! / Break the streets / with the drums, / shine your spiky hair, / maybe you will or maybe you won't / rule yourselves / Carnaval / Carnaval!' (Bernard 1982: 37-38).

The ubiquitous chinamo and the overall dearth of Afro-Costa Rican cultural events that inspire such frustration and cynicism are less an economic corruption of the event than a cultural appropriation by Costa Rican whites. It is not surprising that lately Costa Rican whites seem to have 'taken over' Limón Carnaval. The celebration was enacted as a kind of 'ethnic symbol', a stand-in for Afro-Caribbean culture. Extracting Carnaval from its intended cultural milieu, King artificially planted it in a setting that lacked the required ingredients for its success. Limonenses then collectively legitimated Carnaval as 'traditional' even though the society's historical point of reference does not extend for more than 100 years. This limited cultural history requires a certain amount of innovation in expression coupled with a relatively short legitimisation period for cultural traditions. It is that short legitimisation period which opens them up to a constant feeling of loss as the traditions demonstrate the flexibility and impermanence that made them possible as 'traditions' in the first place. It also makes them vulnerable to usurpation by

other groups, namely entrepreneurial Costa Rican whites who view Carnaval as ripe for economic reward. As Peter Wade points out, the appropriation of black cultural forms by non-blacks inevitably leads to changes in the original significance of the form: 'elements of the original form become incorporated into new configurations, retaining, albeit in diluted form, some of the powers of the antecedent. . . . Hence, again, black forms penetrate, are adapted, and redefined' (Wade 1993:23-24).

Blackness as an Inclusive Category of Experience

The susceptibility of Carnaval to appropriation by white Costa Ricans is a symptom of the disparity between a consciously constructed notion of blackness and the lived experience of Limonenses. The demographic changes which accompanied the civil war began a cultural shift as well that did not necessarily displace the under-girding Afro-Caribbean roots of Limón but definitely added layers of experience that inform and transform the everyday understanding of Limonense identity. This is true not only of white Costa Rican, but also Asian, Indigenous, and Anglo-North American influences. All have combined to displace the ideological hold blackness enjoys over the region with an actual experience that is more diffused and amalgamated.

Many prominent Afro-Costa Ricans have sensed this shift, and are seeking ways to use the emergent Limonense identity in a way that will give some conscious articulation and collective legitimisation to the phenomenon. Quince Duncan explains:

> When you look at the culture of the Caribbean, it's a blending. . . . And I think that is what we have to do in Limón, take more in the sense of Caribbean and less in the sense of *Negro*. . . . The black base is already there, all you have to do is get everyone to assume the Limonense. . . As I say it's more Caribbean. There are certain things I think that blacks have contributed, but I believe there are other things that will come from the Indian population and of course the Spanish will have their contribution to make. I believe in '*La Limonense*,' I believe that is the future.

Duncan feels Afro-Costa Ricans have made an indelible mark on Limón, and by emphasising a more amalgamated identity one may preserve that influence without discounting the lived experience of many other ethnic groups.

This approach is supported by the comments of white Costa Ricans who by identifying as Limonenses make overt connections to blackness as a category of experience. 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'. 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'. One white woman in Puerto Limón describes how she reacted to snubs from Costa Ricans in the Central Valley: 'I tell them if being Limonense means being black, then I am black, because I am proud to be Limonense!' These responses demonstrate the appropriation of blackness by white Limonenses in the face of a parent nation reticent to claim even the whites in the 'black province'. Again, Quince Duncan offers an insightful image of this phenomenon:

> I believe one has to make all the Limonenses, Limonenses. In other words, the majority of the people of Limón are not from Limón, which is a major change in relation to when I was growing up. So one of the things they have to do is make these people into Limonenses. And it is not very hard, because these people . . . I don't know, there is like a certain admiration for the Afro-Caribbean culture. I look at the Carnaval 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.

The appropriation of blackness by whites in Limón, especially the image evoked by the comment, 'you just look at them dancing', recalls the flexibility of embodiment discussed in Chapter One. Though body image remains a salient aspect of self-identification, especially when that image is categorised as black or white, the embodiment of experience allows for more flexible strategies of identification. This helps explain the multi-layered responses one receives when asking about skin colour as illustrated in Chapter Two: 'No, no, he's white like me'. Or Eulalia Bernard's response when asked whether or not a particular artist was white: 'Well, he's Caribbean. The colour of skin is not so relevant here'.

The multi-ethnic identification with blackness obviously plays out unequally across the social landscape of Limón, and its influence on Afro-Costa Ricans remains complex. One Afro-Costa Rican describing her ambivalence about racism in Costa Rica offers an intriguing commentary: '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. The internalisation of the dominant Costa Rican aesthetic system in regard to body image continues to plague the development of an internally constituted Limonense aesthetic, but there is also room here for the inclusive quality of blackness as a category of experience

in terms of skin tone. A white body seems not always to preclude an embodiment of blackness, even if the opposite remains improbable.

Others have made similar observations in various disparate contexts. David Guss describes the celebration of San Juan Congo in Venezuela, an allegedly black idol depicting Saint John, where the idol turns out to have light skin and blonde hair. Guss soon realises 'that the issues of blackness signified by San Juan Congo were much more profound than simple pigmentation . . . For the blackness he represented was that of poverty and oppression. It was the economic and social marginalisation that had defined the African condition since the arrival of the first slaves in the early 1500s' (Guss 1998:264). Guss' observation echoes in the comments made by Toni Morrison when she describes US president Bill Clinton as 'our first black president', who, despite his white skin, 'displays almost every trope of blackness' (Morrison 1998:32). Peter Wade also argues 'it is mistaken to assume that, just because racial signifiers are bodily, they are completely fixed . . . the context of somatic features alters people's classification . . . thus identifications of "black" are malleable' (Wade 1997:38). In these contexts, blackness is an inclusive experiential affiliation with certain social and historical values that undermines the biological determinism of race without detracting from the centrality of 'Africanicity'. Richard Jackson, paraphrasing Leopoldo Zea, writes: 'Blacks . . . affirm their blackness not to isolate themselves but to stand on their ethnic identity in the company of those cultures they assimilate . . . with the black it is a question of incorporating and of assimilating but not of being incorporated and assimilated' (Jackson 1988:52).

According to Guss, 'the fact that San Juan Congo is such a powerful symbol of blackness without actually being black . . . reveals much about the issue of race in

Venezuela' (Guss 1998:265). I would argue the same inclusive quality of blackness as a category of experience reveals as much about race and the process of identity formation in Puerto Limón. In seeking the new '*La Limonense*' articulation of blackness, Duncan and others hope to bring stability and solidarity to a region historically plagued with disunity and powerlessness. The legacy of Carnaval demonstrates the difficulty of this task. Abstracting a new concept of identity runs the risk of everyday lived experience leaving it behind. Identity, as a being-in-the-world phenomenological experience, is by definition ever elusive to objective conceptualisation. A strategy that incorporates the flexibility of experience may strike closer to the mark in the Limón context, and that is precisely what this thesis and its analysis of the phenomenology of aesthetic experience examines in the following chapters.

Phenomenological Identity and the Aesthetic Milieu

Culturally orphaned by the peculiar overlap of the Caribbean and Latin America and by the particular socio-historical context of its own nation, Limonenses struggle between two very different images of cultural identity. One, a national ideology that imagines Limón as a black province, deepens the divisions between the region and its parent nation, as well as the divisions among its own people. The other, the lived experience of a much more complex ethnic reality, remains fluid and disorganised without the collective ideological justification of the wider Costa Rican context.

Limonenses respond to this identity crisis with various strategies in order to unify the collective self-image of the province. Building from the Afro-Costa Rican foundations of Limón, and adding the subsequent ethnic influences of Costa Rican whites

and other smaller ethnic groups, Limonenses struggle toward the goal of identity in fits and starts. It is a fragile balance between loyalty to the only nation they can claim as their own, and a conscious flaunting of the very cultural differences that deepen the estrangement.

Building on the concepts introduced in Part I, the second half of this thesis examines how the various aesthetic expressive forms present in the city of Puerto Limón participate in the formation of this elusive collective identity. While each of the following four chapters focuses on a specific expressive form, the overall analysis demonstrates the intricate integration of all aesthetic practice into the life-world of Limonenses. As such, the aesthetic milieu of the city seeps into the everyday lives of all inhabitants, constantly influencing the 'ineffable reciprocity of feeling' (Eagleton 1990:20) that binds one to another. The thesis will show how the phenomenology of aesthetic experience inherent in the everyday lives of Limonenses challenges the ideological constructs of identity politics and lays the groundwork for a more intuitive, flexible understanding of identity.

Notes

[1] Portions of this discussion of Limón Carnaval are published in an article for *Wadabagei: Journal of the Caribbean and its Diaspora* (R. Sharman 1998).

Figure 3.1 ~ *Perched on the second floor of the turquoise wooden building, above a Caribbean food restaurant and Alfred King's barber shop, the Black Star Line meeting hall is a fitting venue for the UNIA sponsored Negro Day celebration.*



Figure 3.2 ~ *Alfred King, founder of Limón Carnaval and 40 year president of the UNIA.*



PART II

CHAPTER FOUR

SPACE AND PLACE:

The Aesthetics of the Limonense Built Environment

'You see the nice straight streets, wide like that. You don't see nothing like that anywhere else in Costa Rica'.

Darien shifted in his seat as we glided down the highway that connected Limón to the rest of the country. '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 last few barrios of the city blurred past the window of the large bus, and we began to traverse the lush green flatlands of the Atlantic zone.

'The Spanish, they don't know how to build a city, with their narrow little streets. They don't plan ahead'.

Darien continued talking as we passed one town after the next. Soon the highway began the sharp climb into the mountains that would take us through the Zurqui tunnel and into the Central Valley.

'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'.

Darien stared out at the city of San José stretching before us.

'But then the government built the highway, the whites come in, and they f—ked it all up'.

My first tour of Puerto Limón left me disoriented and confused as to the layout of the city. This phenomenon of disorientation is common in new, unfamiliar settings, and soon I began to piece together a mental map of my urban surroundings. The city centre, approximately ten blocks square (see Map), is straight forward enough, neatly laid out in a grid pattern. The few contiguous neighbourhoods follow this basic pattern, testimony to the urban planning of the fruit companies. As one moves further out from the centre,

the neighbourhoods or *barrios* become twisted mazes of hidden roads and alleyways with little visible distinction between one barrio and another. Finally, on the edge of town, the barrios find grid-like order again as planned communities spring up to house Nicaraguan refugees and the growing squatter population.

This rudimentary grasp on the city layout developed as I walked the streets and alleyways, talked to residents and poured over municipal maps. The maps and my own sketches blended into my experience of the city to produce a workable mental map that contextualised the abstract conceptual reality of spatial organisation in the subjective experience of a personal sense of place.

The process of my own spatial orientation illustrates the complexity and importance of the built environment in an analysis of identity and aesthetic experience. Providing the obligatory map of Costa Rica as well as a handy schematic of Puerto Limón at the beginning of the thesis can only go so far in demonstrating the aesthetics of spatial organisation and how that relates to a sense of place. These graphic presentations of spatial reality are abstract, aerial views of the lived-in space Limonenses meet day-to-day at eye level and largely take for granted.

This more phenomenological perspective on the organisation of space in Puerto Limón applies to how the city is laid out as well as how it is built up. The vertical confrontation with architecture also plays an important role in the cultural orientation of Limonenses to a particular way of experiencing the world. This means not only how space is arranged within public and domestic architecture, but how buildings are presented through the particular use of materials in construction and decoration.

The concepts of space and place, as socially constructed orientations to the cultural and material environment, have experienced a renaissance in recent social

science literature. Though early anthropologists gave some notice to the built environment, most notably Morgan's *Houses and House-Life of the American Aborigine* (1965[1881]) and to a lesser extent Durkhiem and Mauss (Durkhiem 1965[1915]; Durkhiem and Mauss 1963[1903]; Mauss and Beauchat 1979[1906]), their work offered little in the way of integrated analysis. In many cases, as in the work of Franz Boas (1964[1888]), recording the architecture of a people was more for posterity than for direct cultural analysis. In the last few decades, academics from behavioural psychology (Altman 1978), architecture (Norberg-Schulz 1971; Oliver 1987), philosophy (Lefebvre 1991) and anthropology (Moore 1986; Lovell 1998) have placed the notions of space as a meaning laden landscape and place as a contextualisation of that space as central to their research[1]. The complexities of 'rootedness' and a sense of place in the globalisation of modernity have brought the issues of how the landscape is perceived and transformed to the forefront of contemporary theorisation.

Moore (1986) offers a concise summary of the most recent anthropological approach, which is rooted in semiotics. Her critique rightly challenges the traditionally structural/semiotic emphasis on space as always already pregnant with discursive meaning. As Moore writes: 'the meaning of any spatial order is not intrinsic, but must be invoked through practice' (Moore 1986:6). Nadia Lovell's (1998) recent anthology of essays on locality and belonging carries this critique further by placing even greater emphasis on the phenomenology of locality and the role of human and social practice in the creation of a sense of place out of undifferentiated space. This approach is particularly insightful as it incorporates the complexity of migration and displacement into ideas about space and place.

But even this important emphasis on the role of human action in constituting locality or 'place in space' risks reifying space into an external materiality existing only for individual or collective manipulation. This perspective devalues the mutually constitutive nature of human practice and socially constructed notions of space and place. Building on the contributions of Gregory and Urry's landmark anthology *Social Relations and Spatial Structures*, Peter Wade contends 'society produces spatial structures . . . [but] these spatial arrangements act as a constraint on, and a set of resources for, further developments of society' (Wade 1993:53).

This thesis situates space and place in the context of an overarching cultural aesthetic able to experientially transform idealised symbols through aesthetic practice. Aesthetic practice is always carried out in space, and not just in the obvious sense of performing some activity on a patch of earth. The space in which aesthetic practice takes place is itself constituted by the aesthetic system that attaches value to the experience of the material environment. The values attached to the environment culturally and materially order the vastness of space into something more conceptually manageable. But this process consists not only in symbolic attachments, it is also confronted moment by moment in lived experience. It is everyday experience that transforms amorphous space into a place, bounded and intimately known. The relationship between space and place then is one of constant contextualisation where place must constantly be 'reembedded' (Giddens 1990) into space through aesthetic practice and the experience of the landscape. As Nadia Lovell points out, 'belonging is . . . fundamentally defined through a sense of experience, a phenomenology of locality which serves to create, mould and reflect perceived ideals surrounding place' (Lovell 1998:1).

This chapter examines this relationship between space and place in the Limonense built environment. In this context, the built environment refers to all the manifestations of human order on the landscape, whether it be laid out or built up, visible or simply communally understood. It is the way humans organise their environment conceptually, physically and experientially, and the way that environment in turn organises human action.

I have placed this chapter as the first of four chapters concerned with various expressive forms, not only because of my view that the organisation of space and place is an expression of the Limonense cultural aesthetic, but also because it contextualises all other aesthetic practices. The ongoing dialectic between the vastness of space and the specificity of place, which itself is embedded in the wider conflict between Limón and Costa Rica, is one of many manifestations of identity formation embedded in the development of an aesthetic system. That system, as defined in Part I, constantly subjects the discursive realm of conceptual meaning attached to such materialities as the landscape, canvas art, performance and literature to the mediation of the non-discursive realm of im-mediate lived experience. This process cuts through similar conflicts and negotiations between blackness as either an ideology of race or an inclusive category of experience, or between the past as either idealised memory or part of an embodied process entering 'cumulatively and constitutively' (Dewey 1981:310) into every present moment, or between gender as either a dichotomised hierarchy of roles or a locus of empowerment and embodied resistance. Of course in practice none of these oppositions are intrinsically 'either/or', they are sets of relationships in constant negotiation. The important point for this chapter is that they all take place in space.

The first section of this chapter discusses the broad theme of the socialisation of space and place in both the national and the local contexts. The racialisation of Limón province by Costa Rican outsiders discussed in the previous chapter is dealt with in more detail here. This same phenomenon is examined on the local inter-barrio level, with special attention to how space is associated with perceptions of danger.

The second section of this chapter is concerned with conceptual boundaries (or lack thereof) between the domestic and the urban built environment of Limón. A case is made for the two realms blending into one another, where the home becomes urbanised and the street becomes domesticated.

The Racialisation of Space

Space, in its physical materiality, is cultural raw material ordered according to collective perceptions and experience. As such, it is susceptible to division according to conceptual associations with socially constructed categories. As certain material spaces become associated with certain of these categories, the experience of those spaces serves to reinforce the category as having a materiality itself; reified into existing outside the parameters of social construction.

Race, as a socially constructed category, is particularly susceptible to this kind of spatial reification. Race, as an embodied category, is already to some extent reified as a material reality in the perceptions of phenotype difference. It is a 'logical' extension of this materiality to associate it with certain parts of the physical environment, dividing the raw material of the landscape according to conceptual associations with the socially

constructed category of race. The result is a racial/spatial order, or racialisation of space that contextualises perceptions of the cultural topography.

This process usually takes place from the top down in terms of social hierarchy. That is to say, it is most often the elite or dominant group which codifies race and attaches its significance to certain bodies and spaces. This inevitably affects those lower down in the hierarchy, constraining not only their ability to self-identify according to their own socially constructed categories, but also constraining how space is ordered on a local level.

This of course applies to Costa Rica and Puerto Limón, as the socialisation of race and the racialisation of space work from the outside constraining the categories and experience of those on the inside. As Giddens points out, the local environment is often 'thoroughly penetrated by and shaped in terms of social influences quite distant from them' (Giddens 1990:18), thus rendering external perceptions crucial to an understanding of internal orientations to the landscape. The following analysis of the racialisation of space by Costa Ricans from the Central Valley is meant to contextualise, both spatially and analytically, the dynamic of socially constructed space on the local level, and ultimately, the creation of a sense of place for Limonenses.

Quotes like those from newspapers in the 1930s vividly express the perceptions of Limón held by Costa Rican outsiders: 'The people of colour of the Atlantic are going to invade the Pacific with grave consequences . . . which we must confront. We must not permit the doors of the Pacific zone to be opened to an avalanche of the races of colour' (Quoted in Bourgois 1989:89). This same attitude was felt all along the Caribbean littoral of Central America as fruit companies set up plantations on unwanted land. The result was indeed an 'Africanisation' (Helms 1977:164) of the Atlantic zone, but not by the

mere presence of Afro-Caribbean labourers. It was the persistence of a collective perception by outsiders, many of whom would never make the arduous journey to the coast, that indelibly marked Limón as the 'black' city in the 'black' province.

For many in Costa Rica, travel between the capital city in the highland Central Valley and Puerto Limón has become feasible only in the last decade. For most of Puerto Limón's development the only method of transportation was a narrow-gauge railway which took a half day to travel the 90 or so miles that separates the city from the rest of Costa Rica. But even on the one artery that connected the two regions there was a colour line Afro-Caribbeans could not cross. The main depot between the port city and San José was Siquirres where the mainly Afro-Caribbean train crew was made to disembark for the white crew to complete the journey into the highlands.

Geographically, the main barrier between Limón and the rest of Costa Rica is 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.

The great social and political changes of the 1950s meant even the volcanoes could not stop Afro-Caribbeans 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 a major roadway. Though a road connecting Limón to 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* was completed, and the floodgates were opened.

As one white Costa Rican shop owner in Limón explained, 'there are probably more blacks in San José than there are in Limón'. This perception, though statistically unverifiable, would appear to the casual observer to be a gross exaggeration. But his sentiment is one shared by many in the capital city and other parts of the Central Valley.

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 our arrival, 'helpful' Costa Ricans warned us of the area, and even our travel guides 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. 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. It is no surprise that the termination point for the journey from that dark, mysterious region of the country would be associated with the social pollution of violent crime and drugs.

The notion of pollution at work in the socialisation of space in Costa Rica is analogous to the concept worked out in Mary Douglas' *Purity and Danger*. For Douglas, the cultural concept of pollution is a 'reaction which condemns any object or idea likely

to confuse or contradict cherished classifications' (Douglas 1966:36). In this sense, it is not surprising that white Costa Ricans could invoke racist stereotypes in the same breath as denying racism. To use Douglas' example, 'shoes are not dirty in themselves, but it is dirty to place them on the dining-table' (Douglas 1966:35).

If we carry the analogy between religious defilement and the racialisation of space in Costa Rica further, we can begin to grasp where the polluting influence of Limonenses' bodies becomes associated with danger. For contemporary white Costa Ricans, Limonenses are in a constant process of acculturation. Their conflicting cultural practices are seen as impediments to their incorporation into the nation, and in this sense they are still viewed as social initiates. 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. 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'. A by-product of this process is the connection between initiates and a subversive 'dangerous' power: 'to have been in the margins is to have been in contact with danger, to have been at a source of power. It is consistent with the ideas about form and formlessness to treat initiates coming out of seclusion as if they were themselves charged with power, hot, dangerous, requiring insulation and a time for cooling down' (Douglas 1966:97).

Limonenses are to outsiders still unformed initiates in the national context of Costa Rica. The space they inhabit becomes associated with that formlessness, and what lacks form and order contains disorder, danger and a strange, unpredictable power. Crucial to this process is the conceptual link between Limonenses and blackness as it is imposed upon them by Costa Rican outsiders. Testimony to the subversive power of

Limonense blackness is its ability to pollute not only space but bodies, such that whites who self-identify as Limonense become just as 'dangerous' and polluted as their darker-skinned neighbours, friends, and family.

It is a self-fulfilling prophecy that because Limonenses remain in a marginal condition, they will be expected to behave anti-socially whether or not experience bears this out. 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. As I have appropriated some of what Douglas has to say about pollution and danger to speak to the Costa Rican racial order, 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.

This process is most clearly seen in the appropriation of Carnaval described in the previous chapter, but also crops up 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 Carnavales which include Limonense comparsas. Perhaps symbolic of all this fetishisation of things Limonense is the construction of a new Limón bus stop in San José. Recently completed, it is a vast, split-level complex located just outside the centre of the city. The old stop is still in use by one of the two main companies that serve Limón, but judging by the popularity of the new location, this may not last long. One could argue that the new bus stop indicates a changing attitude toward Limón among highland Costa Ricans. One could also argue that the new bus stop is conspicuously removed from the city centre, and we have yet to see if the spatial associations of pollution and danger with the old bus stop are to be transposed onto the new location.

The conceptual association between Limonenses and pollution is not restricted to those areas impinged upon in the capital city. Many white Costa Ricans who played some role in the development of Limón have very strong opinions about the province and the city and how they have changed over the decades.

As Figueres wrought fundamental changes in the way Costa Rica dealt with the province of Limón, many white Costa Ricans were sent from the Central Valley to implement those changes. One woman, whose father moved the family to Limón while working on the nationalisation of education in the city, has since moved back to the highlands to start her own family but still maintains a strong emotional connection to Puerto Limón. 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 Central Valley 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'. In the end, the woman shrugged her shoulders and, as if it explained everything, offered, 'It is now in the hands of the blacks'.

This kind of response is consistent with those who claim racial equality in Costa Rica, and even go so far as to celebrate Afro-Costa Rican culture during Carnaval, yet still make overt statements about 'lazy blacks' and their 'dangerous places'. When I mentioned my residence in Limón to a new acquaintance in the Central Valley, his response was the usual mix of shock, disgust and sympathy. In a commiserating tone, he 'sympathised' with my situation, speaking of how the people in Limón do not take care of their houses, refusing to paint or repair them. When I countered that there had been a recent flurry of building activity and that new concrete houses were springing up throughout the city, his focus turned to one of the more notorious barrios, Cieneguita. When I responded that indeed Cieneguita was a poor barrio but that there were over twenty other barrios in the city, he retreated to a dismissive comment about the port. In the end, obviously confused as to my rather unusual defence of the city, he admitted he had never actually spent any time in Puerto Limón.

This particular interchange underscores the influence of imagined space in the perceptions of Costa Rican outsiders. While many never venture down to the Atlantic zone, those that do are usually headed for the small beach resort communities south of Puerto Limón. Interestingly, especially in light of the above comments, the main route

from San José to the resort towns passes through Puerto Limón and down the main avenue of Cieneguita, one of the more notoriously dangerous and crime-ridden barrios in the city. As will be discussed below, it is unclear if Cieneguita's reputation springs from any actually higher incidence of crime, or if perhaps its very notoriousness comes from the fact that it is the one barrio most outsiders see up close. As they move through the urban space of the city, Costa Ricans from the Central Valley are able to make their perceptions of danger and pollution place specific, attaching their mix of fascination and repulsion to the one barrio, Cieneguita, they ever manage to witness first hand. Whatever the multi-layered cause of Cieneguita's reputation, it is clear from all of the above evidence that the perceptions of outsiders exert a considerable influence in the racialisation of Limonense space.

From Space to Place

Space in its very conceptual formulation denotes limits, boundaries and a certain human order that constrains the landscape in both a meaningful and experiential way. A sense of place denotes a particular orientation to that structured space, whether that orientation is one of inclusion or exclusion. Excluded from the space of Limón, outsiders view the region, and the human embodiments of its formless danger, as 'out of place', literally having no place in the Costa Rican context. The same physical space is also ordered from the inside through the experience of belonging, intimate knowledge, a sense of things 'in place'.

Appropriating space in the process of constructing a rooted sense of place establishes a connection to the environment especially important for a largely transient

population. As discussed earlier, the Afro-Caribbean immigrant community of Limón, due to its relatively limited historical relationship with Costa Rica, has rationalised certain cultural forms such as Carnaval into 'traditions' whose ideological roots go much deeper than their actual tenure in the cultural milieu. This is no less true for the Afro-Caribbean connection to the landscape of Limón, which is constantly reproduced with an almost creation myth status in collective memory and various aesthetic practices like canvas art, music and literature. The city itself is viewed as having been carved from the unyielding jungle by Afro-Caribbeans who gave their lives in the process.

For the most part this is not an altogether exaggerated view of Afro-Caribbeans' contributions to Limón's development over the last century, but it does obscure the contributions of other groups like the Chinese, not to mention the investment for better or worse of the Costa Rican national government. Still, Afro-Costa Ricans maintain a certain privileged status as to the foundations of the city and the province that makes the influx of white Costa Ricans over the last half century that much more frustrating.

'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, blames the highway 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 'bad 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. The *de facto* governance over the city and the cultural development of the province enjoyed by Afro-Caribbeans has been directly

challenged by white Costa Rican influence since the civil war and Figueres' grand socialising revolution. 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 resultant mix of differential loyalties to Limón inspires various levels of attachment to the built environment, especially in regard to the creation of a sense of place within urban space. For many of the white Costa Ricans simply enduring their tour of duty in the 'forgotten province', Limón remains largely undifferentiated space fraught with the dangers of blackness. For others, Limón is home, a birthright defended regardless of any particular ethnic identification.

The Qualitative Outcome of Quantitative Data

Confronting the reality of this mixture of attachments in fieldwork inspired a city wide survey that would force me to sort through Limón's spatial-demographic complexities in a manageable, systematic way. The survey was designed at least in part to gauge the perceptions of Limonenses in relation to their particular social and historical connection to the city. The fact that census data has not included ethnic or racial identification since the civil war was added incentive to gain a clearer picture of contemporary Limonense demographics. But the most important outcome of the survey was my introduction to the materiality of Limonense space as it passed into different attachments of place by Limonenses themselves. As I walked through the barrios administering the survey, I was continually confronted with invisible boundaries and vastly differing perceptions of

space. As this chapter presents some of the quantitative data produced by the survey, it also introduces the qualitative experience of space and place throughout the built environment of the city.

The survey covered 250 households in five barrios throughout Puerto Limón (see Appendix A). The barrios were selected according to a random table of numbers to represent two of the 'safer' barrios (Santa Eduviges and Corales), two of the more 'dangerous' barrios (Cieneguita and Roosevelt) and one of the squatter settlements. Within each barrio, households were also selected at random and asked a series of questions to gauge the basic composition of the members of the household (birthplace, ethnicity, marital status, etc.) and some of their perceptions about Limón. The survey produced some interesting results, not the least of which was my own orientation to the further reaches of the city. For the purposes of this chapter, I will focus on the perceptions of Limonenses toward their city and its social landscape.

Santa Eduviges, one of the smaller barrios, ranges over a particularly hilly portion of the city to the north of the city centre. Its houses spill into the tiny valleys and steeply sloping hills in a somewhat haphazard way, exacerbated by the lack of ordered, paved roads. Still, many residents enjoy the best views in Limón perched a couple hundred feet above sea level, and the barrio is considered by many to be one of the safest places to live. Not surprisingly, those living in Santa Eduviges overwhelmingly agree with this perception. The ethnic breakdown of the barrio matches that of the overall statistics, that is, about half Costa Rican white, about 40% Afro-Costa Rican, and the rest split between mixed marriages and smaller ethnic groups. Despite random comments such as, '*Los negros? A mi no me gustan* [Blacks? I don't like them]', residents of 'Santa' refrained from overtly racist comments. Around 75% of those living in Santa Eduviges were born

in Limón and the barrio has one of the highest proportions of married households out of the barrios surveyed. The majority of the houses are built out of concrete, as opposed to the more traditional wooden stilt construction, and almost all of them are owned as opposed to rented. Those in Santa Eduviges consistently rank Cieneguita and Roosevelt as both the most predominantly Afro-Caribbean and the most dangerous barrios in the city.

Corales, another of the 'safe' barrios in the city, lies further out to the west of the city centre. One of the largest barrios in Limón, it is divided into Corales 1, Corales 2 and Corales 3. It is considered by many to be the most suburban (in the middle class sense) barrio in the city with its regular paved roads and well-tended concrete houses. Distributing the survey equally among the three divisions of Corales, the results demonstrate little variation between them, and for the most part they mirror the statistics of Santa Eduviges. The ethnic breakdown of the barrio is slightly more balanced between white Costa Ricans and Afro-Costa Ricans, and Corales boasts an even higher statistic of home ownership than Santa Eduviges. Most residents of Corales consider Corales to be the safest barrio in Puerto Limón, despite the open fears of many residents concerning the squatter settlement that borders the barrio to the south and west.

The squatter settlement, or *precario*, is made up of mostly Nicaraguan immigrants who fled the civil war in their country in the 1980s. Though many of the early immigrants were blacks from Bluefields and other parts of the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua, the squatter settlement today is more than two thirds white, or latino Nicaraguan. Despite the recent installation of electricity and plumbing to the settlement, few Limonenses refer to the settlement as a barrio per se, and few, if any, listed it as either dangerous or safe. The squatters relative lack of rootedness in the space of the city

deserves more attention than this thesis can give, but it does produce an interesting by-product. The residents I spoke with seemed more inclined to offer spontaneous diatribes on their distaste for Limón and Afro-Costa Ricans in particular. Some of the comments made to me included: 'Afro-Costa Ricans? You mean blacks? They are always listening to Reggae and ugly things, always stealing and assaulting people'; 'Limón has too many coloured people. Coloured people are dangerous. They steal and shoot people'; 'Roosevelt and Cieneguita are full of blacks, they are lazy and do not like to work'. One latina woman, when asked which barrio she considered to be the most 'Afro-Costa Rican', responded with anger at my question. She felt I was trying to elicit racist comments, and according to her, 'there is no racism in Costa Rica'.

The squatter settlement is in a unique position in regard to their own particular attachment to the space of the city, but also in regard to the perceptions of Limonenses who do not seem to include them in their mental map of urban space. Their association with transience and impermanence is undermined by the fact that more than half of those living in the squatter settlement were born in Limón. Their exclusion from a meaningful place in the space of the city may precipitate some of their comments about Limón and Limonenses, but it also shows that exclusion occurs on many different levels. Not surprisingly, the squatters ranked the highest in residential dissatisfaction with more than 40% desiring relocation.

The survey establishes the relative perception of safety in Santa Eduviges and Corales, corroborated by the responses of Limonenses in other barrios. The survey also establishes the popular perception of Cieneguita and Roosevelt as two of the most Afro-Costa Rican and most 'dangerous' barrios in Limón. If Limonenses consistently rate

these barrios as the most dangerous, we could expect some variation in the statistics to explain or at least support this perception.

My first walking tour of Cieneguita to carry out the survey began with all the trepidation that the warnings and admonitions of neighbours and friends should have inspired. Danny, a giant of a man only recently arrived from Jamaica, expressed genuine fear at my intention to walk alone into Cieneguita. I was warned my watch would be ripped from my arm, and that I should wear inconspicuous, 'poor' clothing. Unperturbed, but by no means fearless, I set out across the bridge that spans the Cieneguita river and separates the barrio from the city centre. Admittedly, the first few blocks showed signs of neglect, but after exploring the further reaches of the relatively small barrio I found it not much different from any of the others I had visited in the city. New construction seemed evenly distributed throughout the barrio, and many of the residents I spoke with were content with their residence. Interestingly, there did seem to be a general improvement of housing conditions as I moved away from the bridge. When I returned home, my watch intact, my landlord called from her office to make sure I made it home safely.

Much like my experience in Cieneguita, I was surprised at how barrio Roosevelt differed from the impressions of outsiders. Second only to Cieneguita, Roosevelt is considered the most dangerous barrio in the city. It also happened to be my barrio for twelve months. As I developed relationships in my community, I realised a serious gap between my experience of Roosevelt as a close-knit, apparently 'safe' community and the overall perception of it as a dangerous place.

The statistical results of the survey confirmed the gap between city-wide perceptions of danger and my own experience of Cieneguita and Roosevelt First, while Roosevelt matches the general impression of being a predominantly Afro-Costa Rican

barrio, Cieneguita actually reflects a similar ethnic breakdown to Corales. As one middle-aged white Costa Rican man in Cieneguita explains: 'there are not many blacks now'. Not only is there roughly the same number of white Costa Ricans living in Cieneguita as Afro-Costa Ricans, but Cieneguita represents one of highest incidence of mixed marriages among the barrios surveyed. In both Cieneguita and Roosevelt, the majority of houses are of concrete construction and most are privately owned.

If the two apparently 'dangerous' barrios follow the same basic statistical composition as the two 'safe' barrios, how have perceptions of danger associated with the urban space of Cieneguita and Roosevelt developed? One explanation for the gap between perceptions and statistics is the fact that of those white Costa Ricans who balance out the ethnic composition of barrio Cieneguita, more than half are first generation Limonense. Only 15% of marriages among white Costa Ricans in Cieneguita consist of two native Limonenses. This evidence suggests that most of the white Costa Ricans living in Cieneguita are relatively new to the city, and much like the persistent perception of the wider Limonenses context, Cieneguita remains a 'black' barrio despite recent demographic changes. As with Puerto Limón in general, the movement of white Costa Ricans into Cieneguita over the last generation has done more to associate them with the cultural pollution of the barrio in the perceptions of outsiders, than uplift the barrio's reputation. The collective associations between the urban space of Cieneguita and danger proves more powerful than any real demographic changes in the composition of the barrio.

The perceptions of danger associated with Cieneguita and Roosevelt are part of the racial/spatial order that informs similar perceptions in the Central Valley. Elaborated on by other anthropologists studying blackness in Latin America (see Wade 1993; Rahier

1998), the racial/spatial order refers to the persistence of perceptions associated with certain aspects of the national geography as they relate to politically and historically perceived racial patterns. This phenomenon is apparent in other contexts as well, and is particularly prevalent in Puerto Limón. I was continually disoriented by directions from Limonenses who used landmarks no longer present or altered enough to render them useless to a newcomer. Two of the largest buildings in the city centre are known as the 'boys school' and the 'girls school,' though the schools are no longer segregated by gender, and their names have been changed to honour Costa Rican patriarchs. According to many Limonenses, Cieneguita was indeed very much like Roosevelt in its concentration of Afro-Costa Rican residents, but even as its demography has altered, the persistence of perception continues to categorise it as a 'black' barrio in the racial/spatial order.

This may help to explain one particular anomaly in the Cieneguita statistics. Of the mixed marriages in Cieneguita, most consisted of a white Costa Rican male married to an Afro-Costa Rican female. This is a complete reversal of mixed marriage composition in other barrios, the majority of which consist of Afro-Costa Rican males marrying white Costa Rican females. To reiterate a generalisation between Limonense men and women introduced in Chapter Two: men, taking their gender for granted, are keenly aware of their ethnicity; while women must negotiate the liabilities of both gender and ethnicity. As McIlwaine (1997) has pointed out, due to the particular development of Puerto Limón, Afro-Costa Rican women do not feel the same social pressures to marry as white Costa Rican women, but for both the decision to marry is based more on their roles as women than on their ethnic identification. Men have the freedom to base their decision to marry on the perceived benefits of an ethnic alliance, while women must also

make their decision based on the limitations of their 'femaleness' to provide basic necessities. Of course this generalisation assumes a structured strategy to marriage and perceived benefits which cannot match individual experience in every case, but the distinction is drawn to demonstrate how a particular statistical anomaly in mixed marriages might be explained. Within the polluted urban space of Cieneguita, all residents are lumped into the same category so that any currency contained in whiteness is dissolved into the formlessness that characterises the barrio. Just as white Costa Ricans who self-identify as Limonenses are susceptible to the pollution of blackness, the subversive power associated with the dangerous space of Cieneguita subsumes any claim to power predicated on whiteness. As this process unfolds, the usual barriers between white Costa Rican men and Afro-Costa Rican women become less important. It could be argued that white Costa Rican males are lowering their status to a level of equilibrium appropriate to their association with Cieneguita.

Of course, the glaring question of why white Costa Ricans are moving into Cieneguita in the first place remains unanswered. Perhaps here again we see white Costa Ricans attempting to appropriate the source of formless, 'primitive' power Afro-Costa Ricans are perceived to wield. More likely, it has to do with the socio-economic status of recent white Costa Rican arrivals to Limón who view Cieneguita as one of the least expensive housing options. Because of its stigmatised status, it would also be less likely to resist newcomers than more close-knit communities. There could be a host of other explanations for the gap between Limonense perceptions of Cieneguita and the facts presented in the survey, but what remains the salient point of this analysis is the power of pollution in the socialisation of space and place. The cultural process of value attachment among Limonenses and their relation to the urban space of the city proves a

two-way street where the people who order the space around them are in turn ordered by that socially constructed space.

Between the Urban and the Domestic

In conducting the survey, I was concerned with how Limonenses were carving up the urban space in terms of outside perceptions and rooted experience, but this concern focused on more than the generalised space of barrio divisions. As I criss-crossed the city in the process of completing the survey, I was constantly confronted with the way in which Limón is built up as well as laid out. The architectural contributions to the landscape added levels to the plain of spatial experience that would prove crucial to a thorough account of how space is ordered and place constructed.

While the survey focused on households throughout the various barrios, the data gathered in regard to the use of space in the domestic built environment reflected similar developments in the commercial, more public sector of the city. A discussion of this more general aspect of the built environment will contextualise the particularity of domestic space discussed below.

The Built Environment and the City

When the UFC first laid plans for the port and its accompanying urban centre, the design of the commercial and public buildings followed the same architectural style as the wood stilt-houses constructed to house employees, though on a much grander scale. The one

early attempt at a more classical stone structure for the main hospital failed to materialise.

After the port was nationalised in the wake of the civil war, Limón's city centre was transformed by the influence of highland civil engineers and their single-minded focus on concrete. One prominent example of this process is embodied in the Gimnasio Evy Bermudes in Barrio Roosevelt. The large, poorly ventilated, concrete block of a building was designed for a highland city where temperatures rarely climb higher than 20°C, and the air is dry. When the municipality of Limón complained that not enough public investment was being made in the city, the building was re-designated for Limón – without troubling to change the architectural design. The result is a gymnasium ill-suited to the Limonense climate, but oddly at home in the pastiche of borrowed style that makes up the Limón built environment.

In the last two decades, the modernisation of Limón has quickened its pace due in large part to the new highway (see Figure 4.1). The grid-like streets are now paved to accommodate the influx of automobile traffic. The old wooden hotels, bars and shops are now replaced by the cheaper, allegedly more durable concrete structures to accommodate the influx of new inhabitants. The commercial centre of the city has effectively paved over almost every vestige of organic life.

An important by-product of this process is the novelty of building up as never before. Two and three-storey buildings crowd around the central market and spread out to the borders of neighbouring barrios. The modern city centre has undergone a privatisation of elevated space while retaining few divisions at ground level. The streets of Limón blend into the shops and bars where all space on the ground teems with life at most hours of the day. Hardly a week goes by that some street in the centre is not closed

down to cars for a small festival or market. At Carnaval time this takes on almost ridiculous proportions as discos, restaurants and bars are built in the middle of the streets, completing at least temporarily the pedestrian appropriation of all ground level space in the city centre (see Figure 4.2).

Even as all of this life teems in the streets at ground level, there is that private sphere that hovers overhead. Embodied most clearly in the hotels which stand taller than any other building and whose rooms for hire to tourists and transients are the least integrated into the daily life of Limonenses, the private space above ground level appears throughout the urban built environment. During school band performances and Carnaval time, the upper stories of buildings serve as grandstands for the performances below, but remain restricted to those who own the buildings, cut off from the general public. The Black Star Line of the UNIA draws this distinction as well, with its meeting hall perched above the more public space of barbershop and restaurant below. Built in the old wood style it does not rely on concrete to inform this distinction, but may represent an important precursor of the dichotomy that has become ubiquitous in Limón's concrete built environment.

An interesting example of how this up:down::private:public dichotomy might inform certain cultural processes is in the church architecture of Limón. For the most part, Limón churches are single-storey buildings whose sanctuaries greet worshipers on ground level. The notable exception is the First Baptist Church whose sanctuary is built on the upper level of a two-storey building. Of the four main city churches, the First Baptist Church is also the only one that has not added a Spanish worship service. As a result, the congregation is the most uniformly Afro-Costa Rican in the city. Though the First Baptist Church would not consider itself private as such, the *de facto* exclusion of

Spanish speakers does produce a worship space that is further removed from the public sphere than other churches. By placing the sanctuary on the upper level in the built environment, the church falls into the pattern of private versus public space reproduced throughout the city.

Placing the Black Star Line and the First Baptist Church in context with the well-known Afro-Costa Rican restaurant, Antillitas, offers another layer of complexity to the spatial pattern under analysis. Antillitas, famous for Caribbean food and weekly calypso performances, is one of the only commercial enterprises in Limón not entered at ground level. Perched on the second storey of a concrete building overlooking a tired little street on the outskirts of the city centre, Antillitas completes the conceptual link between Afro-Costa Ricans and upper level private space. By associating distinctly Afro-Costa Rican space with the vertical continuum in the built environment, Afro-Costa Ricans may be reproducing the same feeling of superiority that salvaged self-respect in the early days of the UFC. Three high profile loci of Afro-Costa Rican identity literally look down on the rest of the city, offering a material connection to the idealised notion of blackness as something set apart and distinctly identifiable. But the dynamic is more complex than a reproduction of ideological blackness, for none of the three entities are private as such. This undermines the strict up:down::private:public dichotomy, and is precisely what characterises the Afro-Costa Rican claim on Limonense identity: the public invading the private; a blurring of the lines where essentialist rhetoric slides into the blended Caribbeanness of Limón identity. What begins as an appropriation of excluded space by Afro-Costa Ricans becomes a place from which no one is excluded but in which all must acknowledge the foundation of blackness.

The Domestic Built Environment

This discussion of commercial space in the built environment should set the context for an analysis of domestic space which was the focus of my survey. As I walked through the various barrios, it was apparent that the urbanising trend of concrete construction was affecting the domestic built environment throughout the city. More than half of the houses surveyed were of concrete construction, with only one third still in the traditional wood stilt-house style. The rest were of a intermediary material called Ricolit fabricated in Cartago as a replacement for asbestos.

This trend is an important break from the archetypal image of domestic architecture in Puerto Limón as the colonially influenced Victorian style stilt-house built of wood and painted bright pinks, greens, and blues. This image is sentimentally associated with the tourist's Caribbean and rarely if ever examined as a vernacular architectural style. The influence of Caribbean architecture in Limón is one of the factors which contributes to its contrast with the rest of Costa Rica, as artist German Mora discovered when he tried to sell his art in San José: 'No, that's not like typical Costa Rican art. Typical Costa Rican art has adobe houses'.

The fact that Limonense canvas artists are painting the wooden stilt-houses at all offers some indication of how anachronistic the style is in contemporary Limón. As we will learn in the next chapter, canvas artists deal in the nostalgic realm of collectively constructed memory, and the archetypal house form in Limón has become an ideal that is rarely if ever implemented in new construction. Today, the remaining wooden stilt-houses are being razed to make room for the concrete monoliths that mirror the architecture in the rest of Costa Rica (see Figures 4.3 and 4.4). As this process unfolds, it

is important to explore the origins of domestic architecture in Limón, its influences, and how the conceptual link to the past it provides is as open to experiential transformation as Carnaval or Negro Day.

Many of the houses around Puerto Limón that fit the nostalgic image of traditional Caribbean architecture were built by the United Fruit Company at the turn of the century. Usually built as row houses, their simple design made them ideal for mass production to shelter the thousands of banana workers. As elsewhere in the Caribbean, the houses were built from wood on silts with relatively little interior compartmentalisation. These characteristics were as much for the comfort of occupants in the humid heat of the region as for cost considerations by the UFC. As the UFC management no doubt were familiar with solutions to mass housing in other parts of the Caribbean, it is not surprising that design elements were borrowed from what would become a Caribbean architectural style.

So this particular Caribbean style in domestic architecture has less to do with a vernacular sense of taste than with a colonially inspired solution to mass housing. The Victorian detail in the woodwork, the broken roof lines, the bright colours, all are products of British colonialism in the Caribbean. The traditional house-style so closely identified with Limón remains one more illustration of their disconnection from a sense of experiential continuity with the region. In yet another ironic twist, the Limón house-style that is so closely, and disparagingly, associated with blackness is actually the product of an Anglo-European architectural aesthetic.

As Purcell (1993) has pointed out, Afro-Costa Ricans who once sought to emulate the values of Anglo-Europeans and, later, Anglo-North Americans as a strategy for social and economic advancement have been forced to emulate the values of Anglo-Costa Ricans since the political changes of the 1940s. This 'value transaction', inevitably on

the currency of the dominant Anglo group, offers one explanation for the earlier adoption of the wood stilt-house, and may well explain the recent proliferation of a house-style common to the Central Valley. But this should not obscure the alternate competing value placed on a ideology of blackness. The differences between the wood-stilt house and the more modern concrete house must be contextualised in the overall cultural negotiation between two competing value systems. On the one hand is the ideology of blackness that upholds 'traditional' cultural forms as idealised images of black identity. The other, competing ideal, is the overarching Costa Rican nationalism that seeks to transform Limonenses into one homogenous reflection of white Costa Rican culture. Both the traditional wood stilt house and the newer concrete houses are implementations of ideal types, and both derive from a non-native architectural tradition transplanted to meet the needs of mass housing[2]. In living out daily life within the domestic space of these competing ideals, Limonenses are constantly confronting their concretisation.

While these two value systems compete for ideological elbow room in the space of the Limonense cityscape, a more inclusive notion of blackness incorporates both into the experience of the built environment. The historical origin of the Caribbean house-style in Limón may undermine its claim to be a 'true' expression of blackness as an essentialist category, but it actually supports the subtler, more inclusive notion of blackness that subsumes foreign influences into a syncretic expression of identity. The development of domestic architecture in Limón is an example of how the discursive realm of identity formation seeks to concretise transitory forms into ideal concepts while the non-discursive realm of everyday experience subjects those concepts to experiential transformation.

What makes this scenario even more complicated is that the new trend in concrete domestic architecture is more than just another example of Limón's indebtedness to the current dominant cultural influence, it is also a trend toward urbanisation that is erasing Limón's connection to its supposed rural past. As the old wood stilt-houses represent the pre-urban idyllic image of Afro-Caribbean life in Limón portrayed in the canvas art of Limonense painters, the new concrete houses represent the modern dominance of the city and all its social complications. The new concrete houses close down and compartmentalise space within the home, drawing a clear line between public and private space that did not exist in the older wood stilt-houses. The wrought iron bars that criss-cross the windows and porches of the new houses only add to that sense of spatial delineation, reflecting the heightened sense of vulnerability as Limón grows more and more urban. This process of urbanisation brings with it the problems of social disconnection and alienation common to any growing city, and the new house construction is Limón's architectural reaction - literally concretising the emotional response of Limonenses to their changing cultural environment.

In the older, wood stilt-houses, space is arranged in such a way as to allow a seamless integration with outside. The lines between inside and outside are blurred by open windows, a central breezeway, and a front porch. Again, these aspects of the wood stilt-house style are due in many respects to the requirements of mass housing, but their appropriation by Limonenses and outsiders as the archetypal image of local domestic architecture is an important part of their experience in the cultural environment.

As the new concrete house style represents a direct borrowing from the typical highland style, certain details of its design not only prove ill-fitted to the physical environment of Limón, but also stand in stark contrast to the design elements of the older

house form. The new concrete houses provide for fewer, more narrow windows than the older style, and unlike their wooden counterparts, are invariably covered by wrought-iron bars. The floor plan disrupts the more traditional breezeway between front and back doors in favour of small foyers that introduce the compartmentalisation that characterises the rest of the house design. Rooms are closed off and privatised. Finally, one of the most startling differences in the two types of house design is the removal of the front porch from direct contact with the street. The porch area is either raised to the second floor or moved to the back where it becomes a private patio.

The novelty of a second storey in domestic architecture sets up an important new division of space embodied in the lifting of the front porch away from ground level. Like the division of space in the commercial built environment, domestic space is undergoing its own dichotomization of up:down::private:public. In the older, less compartmentalised design of the wood stilt houses, sleeping areas blended with living and cooking areas all on the same level. Now, the two-storey concrete dwellings generally divide sleeping areas from living areas along a vertical continuum. Upstairs is associated with private space, a relatively new category in the domestic built environment.

This was particularly evident in the house I occupied which closed off the upstairs bedrooms with a bolted door. I shared the house with a middle-aged, unmarried Afro-Costa Rican woman and her older brother. They had lived on the same plot of land for two generations, maintaining one of the traditional wood stilt-houses up until 1990. That year they decided to tear down the old wooden structure and build a concrete house. With the help of two brothers living in the States, and much to the chagrin of some neighbours who considered their old home an historical landmark, the family razed the house and began building. Downstairs was left open, maintaining some semblance of

public space associated with the older house style, but the new upper level was partitioned into bedrooms and bathrooms, closed off from downstairs with a heavy wooden door almost always kept locked. Much of the family socialising, which once took place at the old house, was moved around the corner to a sister's house, and despite the open design of the lower level, the new house was rarely used for entertaining. One poignant reminder of the old house remained, however. In the patch of grass that fronted the house, two squat wooden stilts that once held up the family home were made into planters.

But even in the urbanisation of the domestic built environment, Limonenses are demonstrating the power of the phenomenological undercurrent to concretised meaning. Through daily practice, they are participating in the experiential transformation of the foreign architectural style. One of the more notable examples of this is in the wrought iron bars that encase many of the new concrete houses. Small welding shops have sprung up around the city to provide a decorative touch to the ubiquitous iron bars. Many of these decorative flares in the ironwork can be linked to the often intricate detail of porch railings and lattice work in the older wood houses. Danny, a welder who makes custom security bars out of his home in barrio Roosevelt, considers his job more decorative than protective, and has seen orders for his work steadily increase over the last five years.

Another example of a uniquely Limonense response to the new concrete house style is the integration of small gardens in the architectural design. As the new houses compartmentalise space within the home, they also reserve space for a small garden somewhere in the floor plan, usually in the centre of the house. The gardens serve as focal points for the organisation of space in the new design, as if to enshrine nature in the midst of urban encroachment. This can also be seen on a more general level in the

arrangement of space in the city centre. There, Parque Vargas remains the one vestige of nature in the concrete grid of streets and buildings, reflecting perhaps the same homage to nature as a link to a more idyllic past.

One final example of the experiential transformation of the nationalist ideology embodied in the concrete design is the way in which the houses are not used by Limonenses. As the old wood stilt-houses blurred the line between public and private, Limonenses often used domestic space as public space and vice versa. One woman, famous for her house parties before she tore down her old wood house, complains that her new two-storey concrete house just does not suit socialising. Now neighbours and friends accuse her of not wanting anyone to 'mess up' her fancy new house, and the parties are held elsewhere. Like the collective cultural abdication from Carnaval, many Limonenses are withdrawing from the new concrete house as a focal point for social interaction in favour of the common ground of the street. At night, residents crowd the pavement of the barrios socialising and sometimes entertaining on the street. As the house becomes urbanised, the streets become domesticated.

At Home in the Street

It is important to point out that the up:down::private:public dichotomy outlined above is the product of analysis intended to reveal certain attitudes toward the built environment and how the experience of that environment might influence identity. Throughout the rather formidable amount of literature produced on the relationship between social organisation and the built environment, two schools of thought take opposing views as to the dynamics of that relationship. Some would argue that culture constrains the way we

adapt our architectural design to the natural environment (see Rapoport 1982; Norberg-Schulz 1971). The built environment becomes malleable to the demands of collective meaning and the social use of space. This culturalist perspective on the built environment would argue that the need to dichotomise private and public space in the increasing urbanisation of Limón motivates the vertical design of contemporary Limonense architecture. Others contend that it is the built environment that constrains the way we formulate collective meaning (see Hillier and Hanson 1984). For them, the novelty of more than one-storey in urban Limonense architecture dictates the division of private and public space along a vertical continuum.

Between these opposing views lies the dialectical pattern of identity formation in an aesthetic system that undergirds this thesis. The Limonense relationship to the built environment, as anywhere, is one born in conflict and characterised by constant negotiation. The complexity of the conflict is evident in the colonial and hegemonic national origins of the various manifestations of architectural design in Limón and the fickleness of individuals in regard to appropriated style. The constant negotiation is characterised by the imposition of meaning into the ordered space of the built environment which is itself constantly informing the construction of that meaning. All of this is mediated by the variegates of everyday experience which reduces appeals to a conceptual reckoning with the construction of meaning in the built environment to an intuitive notion of space and place as the shifting sand upon which identity is formed.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the social constructions of space and place in Limón is the way in which the negative space, the space in between buildings and houses, seems the most important space in the built environment. The streets of Puerto Limón are the landscapes of social interaction, where daily life takes place in its most

public and its most intimate qualities. When the Brasileros comparsa shuts down an entire city block in barrio Roosevelt for a practice session, the dancers and musicians take over the street, filling the barrio with their polyrhythmic beat and boastful chants. When Carnaval gears up each October, it is the streets that receive its revelry. When children fall into a pick-up game of football, it is in the streets of the barrios that they play, halted only occasionally by the odd taxi or city bus. Lovers, family and friends all treat the streets of the city as the corridors of their own dwelling, making their home on the pavement and gravel.

Ruel Johnson owns half of an entire block in barrio Roosevelt. At one end of the street is his lumber warehouse, at the other his machinist shop. Sandwiched in between is his house, a one-storey wood structure in the old style. When I arrived one afternoon to talk with him about growing up in Limón, he switched off the American baseball game blaring on his television and settled into one of two chairs. 'Used to be baseball was much more popular', Ruel said, after offering a detailed account of recent trade between the Cubs and the Mets in the States. 'We used to play out in the streets like they do now with the football. Used to be we had to pitch in for the ball. Sometimes we could only afford two balls!'

On the wall to our left hung a Caribbean landscape painted by his son, Donoval, the local Methodist minister. Behind him stood his old upright piano with a handmade runner knit in the colours of the American flag and proudly portraying the images of Martin Luther King Jr., Robert Kennedy and John F. Kennedy.

Ruel leaned forward to tell me the story of his first television. It was in fact one of the first televisions in the neighbourhood, and he wasted no time in taking advantage of the novelty. Setting the television in the window of his house, he charged the

neighbourhood kids a couple of colones to sit in the street and watch the one or two programmes he managed to tune in. Domestic space was turned inside out as Limonenses made themselves comfortable in the familiarity of the street to watch Ruel's new television. The lines between public and private were not just blurred; they were erased.

My experience with Ruel Johnson expresses much of what I have tried to lay out in the preceding pages. Ruel surrounds himself with the material cues of identity in everything from the style of his house to the decorations on the wall. It is through this constructed landscape that Ruel, like so many other Limonenses, move on a daily basis. For the most part, the experience of its various qualities remains on a phenomenological level, but occasionally some artefact, like a television or painting on the wall, cues a conceptual connection to some latent meaning always ready to valorise experience. As value is added to the experience of space, so that space becomes incorporated into the milieu of place. And it is a sense of place that is so important to the formation of a cohesive identity.

But even as the built environment and the spaces in between are incorporated into a sense of place for Limonenses, they become even further removed from the experience of outsiders. As we have seen in the perceptions of outsiders (and this is not necessarily a place-specific term) the attachment of value to experience runs both ways. As Limonenses struggle through the process of identity formation within the machinations of a dynamic and constantly evolving aesthetic system, they will continue to confront their own exoticism in their dealings on the national level. It is a process fraught with perceived power; a power that may be as destructive as it is productive.

In the following chapters some of the other manifestations of the Limonense aesthetic system will be examined in detail. This analysis of space and place is offered as a contextualisation of all creative activity in Limón, which unavoidably takes place in the built environment. The overarching goal of this work is to discover how all of these different aspects of a Limonense aesthetic work together in the process of identity formation in a most uniquely complex cultural environment.

Notes

[1] An attempt to highlight the wealth of literature on space and place in recent years would litter the page with parenthetical references. For a thoroughly annotated bibliography at least up to 1990 see Lawrence and Low 1990.

[2] This latter point is illustrated in the housing developments on the outskirts of Puerto Limón where the Costa Rican government is providing new concrete housing for recent immigrants to the province.

Figure 4.1 ~ *In the last two decades, the modernisation of Limón has quickened its pace due in large part to the new highway. The grid-like streets are now paved to accommodate the influx of automobile traffic.*



Figure 4.2 ~ *At Carnaval time discos, restaurants and bars are built in the middle of the streets, completing at least temporarily the pedestrian appropriation of all ground level space in the city centre.*



Figure 4.3 and 4.4 ~ *Today, the remaining wooden stilt-houses are being razed to make room for the concrete monoliths that mirror the architecture in the rest of Costa Rica.*





CHAPTER FIVE

ART AND CRAFT:

Cultural Materiality Writ Small

'All the painters around here are students of mine'.

Negrín spoke with his eyes glued to the busy street just inches away. We sat where he was a permanent fixture of Limón city life, on a narrow strip of concrete sidewalk with his half-finished canvas on the rickety easel to his side and his dilapidated house sagging in the background.

'Yes, there were painters before me, but they did not paint anything like I paint. I am trying to rescue the culture'.

Negrín finally tore his eyes from the fish mongers and the smoky old school busses-cum-public transport and explained, 'It was better in the past. There was more scenery, more culture, more inspirations to paint. Now there are no inspirations. There are cars and highways and the people are of a different sentiment'.

He sagged in his flimsy wire lounge chair, and as his eyes drifted back to the street, said quietly, 'Of course, it's all different. It's all in the past'.

The preceding discussion of space and place dealt with a cultural materiality that is stretched across the landscape in such a way as to make discursive connections difficult and tenuous. As such it remains very much an experiential part of the overarching cultural aesthetic of Limón. When that expressive materiality is compacted into smaller, more graphic forms, the line between discursive meaning and that which is more intuitively experienced becomes both sharper and more ambiguous. Sharper because graphic objects project meaning in an overtly symbolic manner, always forcing the symbol to pre-mediate immediate experience. More ambiguous because the dominance of symbolic, discursive meaning often obscures the ongoing process of value attachment

in the realm of lived experience making it more difficult to apprehend and therefore examine.

In the lifeworld of Limonenses, canvas art is the graphic object that best exemplifies the paradox outlined above. Canvas art is cultural materiality writ small; a compact, dense nexus of meaning set against (and inside) the more fluid bounds of space and place. But because it is in space, connected to a place, and unavoidably material, canvas art is also an object of experience to which Limonense may attach a value quite distinct from its symbolic intentions. Even as its stylistic conventions present the ideals of blackness as an ideology of identity, its insertion into the lifeworld of lived experience supplants the inflexibility of a polemical blackness for a more phenomenological, inclusive blackness.

But there is far more at work here. As a material object, canvas art is bound up in the same political, economic and interpersonal relationships to which all objects owe their existence. This is particularly important in regard to gender differentiation throughout Limonense cultural life. As in music and literature, this amounts to the exclusion of women from legitimate creative arenas. The response from women, as is often the case, has been to create their own creative space in which to express their connection to the Limonense cultural aesthetic. Like blackness itself, women are interested in creating a cultural space away from the restrictions and repression of the dominant, 'legitimate' social milieu in which to explore their own connection to the surrounding world.

This chapter examines the role of the plastic arts in the process of identity formation, a process which includes the work of artists, artisans, and the wider Limonense context in which both are produced and consumed. This involves a detailed

analysis which examines Limón canvas art in light of Western aesthetic concepts of the artist as individual and the art work as creatively original in both its communal and re-creative aspects. The analysis of canvas art will also demonstrate the ideological role of the expressive form, and how the representational style is tied to the overall identity crisis of Limón. The analysis then turns to the internal aesthetic hierarchy of Limón art, and how gender and power are involved in the distinction between artist and artisan. Finally, the chapter uses the analysis to show how the ideological and phenomenological aspects of the plastic arts in Limón influence the formation of a cultural identity.

The Painter's Aesthetic

Outsiders often equate canvas art in Limón with tourist art; a cottage industry slavishly serving the aesthetic tastes of cruise ship passengers and weekend travellers from the capital city. Limonense artists all paint in their homes and most paint full-time, though few make enough for a comfortable living. The paintings are invariably brightly coloured oil on canvas compositions. The scene is first sketched out in pencil on canvas, most often copying from a photograph that is graphed to scale. The paint is then applied in stages, with any one painting requiring several days or weeks to complete. As a result, most artists work on several compositions at the same time providing they have the financial resources to purchase materials. The subject matter of the paintings fall into a limited number of categories including country scenes, beach scenes, railroad scenes, or the rare city scene. With a few notable exceptions, the paintings portray a nostalgic image of Limón life peopled almost entirely by cartoon-like Afro-Caribbean figures (see Figures 5.1 and 5.2). The similarity in style has prompted some to joke that only the

signature distinguishes one artist from another.

This simple description of Limonense canvas art belies a complex cultural process at work among the artists. A controlled, predictable expressive style characterised by vibrant colours, fine detail, and a tendency to exaggerate and stereotype human features expresses a close connection to the past and the Afro-Caribbean heritage of the region. There is a clear pattern operating throughout each work.

This pattern could be deconstructed and analysed for its own sake, but the purpose of this analysis is to understand the cultural processes behind a Limón aesthetic in canvas art. There are four important aspects of the Limón aesthetic that will aid this endeavour: the communal nature of both the artists and Limón society; the ubiquitous theme of Limón's Afro-Caribbean past; the re-creative stylistic conformity apparent in all Limonense painting; and the representational approach to composition.

The Negrín School and Artistic Community

When I first arrived in Puerto Limón, making the daily walks around the city, I came upon a man painting in the city centre. He sat in a wire chair precariously close to the chaotic street and attended to a canvas filled with mango trees and wood stilt houses. Occasionally a small crowd would gather to watch, and then slowly drift away. A friend of the artist might hang about exchanging small talk for a while, but for the most part, the artist kept to himself. I filed the encounter in the back of my mind. I did not even ask the man's name. It was a curious discovery, a vocational anomaly. He was surely unique in this gritty port city.

Soon after, I came to understand the importance of canvas art in Limón, and set out to find its founding father, a man named Negrín. 'He is in the city centre, you can't miss him', everyone told me. I asked in several small businesses. Each time I was greeted with a knowing smile and more detailed directions. When I finally reached the narrow strip of concrete between a shabby building and the street where Negrín was meant to work, I discovered the same lone artist from my first forays into the city.

I relate this story to demonstrate one of the most important aspects of Limonense canvas art: its rootedness in community and everyday life. Negrín, who has sold paintings all over the world, is that permanent fixture in the hustle and bustle of city life that occasionally we stop and attend to, but for the most part pass by on the way to the post office or the market, mentally filing away the experience as one of many. Negrín, like his paintings and like all of the artists in Limón, is both known and anonymous. It is this aspect which lends power to his expressive products: they are known and therefore attended to and appreciated as graphic, symbolic objects; yet they are also anonymously woven into the fabric of everyday experience.

In as much as community is important in the relationship between Limonense canvas art and the underlying cultural aesthetic, Negrín remains the acknowledged founder and patriarch of the form. Negrín, also known as Ricardo Rodriguez-Córdoba, pioneered what is today the Limón style. He was born in Puerto Limón after his parents moved from the Pacific Coast in the 1930s. Now 57 years old, Negrín lives with his wife in the cement block house amidst the dusty streets of the city centre where he sets his easel every day from eight until two.

Negrín started painting at a young age, but like most artists in Limón, turned to the port for work to put food on the table. Unlike most artists in Limón, Negrín was able

to eventually quit his job and paint full-time. Throughout the 1970s, Negrín's work became increasingly more valuable, selling in galleries in San José, as well as New York, Los Angeles, Moscow and Paris.

His success attracted his first pupils, such as Juan Kelly, who now owns a gallery in California. Gradually, Negrín came to be known as the father of Limón canvas art, and few sought a career in art without first consulting him. This produced an inevitable stylistic conformity among Limonense artists, and as their numbers swelled they formed an association informally controlled by Negrín.

The loosely organised association of Limonense painters expresses a similar communal spirit as the schools of the early Italian Renaissance. Like the schools of the Renaissance, Negrín's association places the individual artists in a subordinate position to the overarching style, and as such assures a predictable, homogenous product. With Negrín as the master, other artists submit to an apprenticeship not only to learn the technique of canvas art, but also to earn the credential of a Negrín pupil.

As such, Negrín has become the gatekeeper of artistic legitimacy in Limón, though he denies any control over other painters in Limón: 'It's more like I am a friend. When one person has success at something, others will want to do the same thing. It's not my fault that others paint like me. I have no control over what others paint'. Still, many feel personally excluded by Negrín from the association's activities. One young white Costa Rican artist manages to earn as high an income as Negrín for his work, yet is notoriously at odds with Negrín and has little to do with the association. Other painters clearly articulate their submission to Negrín's authority. A young Afro-Costa Rican artist, describes Negrín as 'the precursor of this style'. Another artist explains: 'Negrín has his style, and his is an authentic style that we follow. We are in the middle of his

area. He is not in ours. We are in his style. It's like a tree with its branches. Its trunk remains, but the branches must grow'.

One of the most glaring examples of Negrín's gatekeeping is the absence of women canvas artists. Though at least two women have continued to paint on canvas in Limón, they are not considered part of the informal community of artists headed by Negrín. By not recognising women's talents as artists, Negrín withholds the credential of artistic legitimacy that is so important to the success of artists in Limón. This has serious implications for the development of a counter-movement among women in the plastic arts to be discussed below.

Under the influence of Negrín, individuality is tacitly discouraged within the community of artists in Limón. The aesthetic ideal, which is linked as much to the demands of the market and the gatekeeping role of Negrín as it is to any creative impulse, subsumes the individual artist under one homogeneous style. This of course contrasts with the Western aesthetic notion of the artist as the ultimate individual. In the traditional Western concept, the artist is removed from the social context of everyday life, and is therefore somehow better equipped to objectively observe and comment on society. Perhaps for this reason alone, the canvas art community as described in Limón would not fit under the rubric of art in the Western aesthetic tradition. But this is precisely the point. Limonense artists do not rely on the autonomy of the individual artist to legitimate their expressive form. Rather, they rely on their ability to express connections to the Limonense lifeworld to confirm their expressive products.

This of course goes beyond the influence of Negrín to illuminate the communal nature of Limón life in general. Much of Limonense life involves the presentation of self as part of a cultural collective. This is due in part to the individual internalisation of

certain regional stereotypes imposed from outside as discussed in the previous chapter, but is also due to the externalisation of resistance to the essentialism of these stereotypes. Part of that resistance is a co-opting of racist symbols to be used in the construction of a locally owned identity. Another part of that resistance is the levelling of individuals such that those who positively self-identify as Limonenses remain on the same social level (though power remains differentially located).

The result is that, like the anonymity of early Renaissance painters, Limonense artists are 'small folk' with humble backgrounds (Hauser 1951). Most worked the dock at some time, and all of them are intimately involved in the often arduous task of everyday life in Puerto Limón. Their connection to the surrounding community is not artistic artifice, it is inborn and integral to their creative process. Limonense canvas artists live their paintings, 'and it is the incomparable quality of this relation to the world, this "style of life"' (Dufrenne 1973:106), which shines through their collective style. Far from degrading the aesthetic legitimacy of the different pieces, the craft characteristics of their work 'appear full of meaning and, as if transfigured by it, in accordance with that immanence of meaning in the sign which defines expression' (Dufrenne 1973:106).

At least one artist, quoted in the epigraph of Chapter One, describes his desire to insulate himself from the world around him while he is painting: 'when a painter begins to work he needs to close himself off from the world. He has the inspiration, then he needs solitude. Once he has finished he can return to life'. In the actual process of placing pigment on canvas the artist does indeed physically act in isolation from other artists, but the social reality of all artists in Limón who paint on the street or in their homes among friends, family and passers-by, makes total isolation difficult if not impossible. The world, as an ever present lifeworld of experience and meaning, impinges

upon the re-creative act of painting, contributing to the finished product as an expressive part of that world. The 'world of the work' is the work in context, the lifeworld in which the work is carried out and without which there would be nothing to express.

Edgar Ramirez, a white Costa Rican painter who lives in the city centre, paints in the courtyard of his apartment building. Accessible only via a narrow alleyway, the apartments are dilapidated structures of rotted wood and crumbling concrete. I visited Ramirez one day to talk about his work as a menagerie of stray animals scrambled about the courtyard and neighbours argued from their open doorways. I asked him if he would be more productive in a quiet studio, perhaps shared with other artists. At first, he decried the shabby state of his working environment with all its distractions of clutter. Then he brought out a finished piece that incorporated the apartments and a few stray dogs into the background. He described how he used his environment to 'paint what he saw'. While individual painters may work in isolation from each other, their efforts are intimately integrated into the social environment which constantly surrounds them.

The Limonense canvas artist is not only acting in concert with the daily life surrounding them on the street and in their homes, but also in the more subtle connection between all artists in Limón. That connection constrains the aesthetic product, ensuring the finished canvas is a reflection of the stylistic conventions set up by Negrín, but extending beyond his influence. Other influences include the exclusion of women, which places the all-male cohort of artists in a position to presume a universal knowledge of local, gender differentiated experience. Another influence is the inclusion of white Costa Ricans painting 'black themes', which positions blackness as an inclusive nexus of identity formation that cuts across ethnic divisions. The result is an expressive form produced by individuals but directed and controlled by the wider association of artists.

The communal nature of Limón canvas art differs from the individualistic nature of Western aesthetics, yet participates in the development of its own, culturally specific, Limonense aesthetic. This Limonense aesthetic is premised on the integration of the individual into the wider social context, the members of which not only consume the finished products, but literally peer over the shoulder of the artists as they paint in the streets of the city. This communal nature is one aspect of Limón canvas art, and indeed of Limón aesthetics in general, that makes it so powerful in the formation of a cohesive cultural identity.

The Afro-Caribbean Past

Throughout the various incarnations of the communal Limón style, with a few notable exceptions, the human form is invariably that of dark skinned Afro-Caribbeans set in nostalgic scenes of life when few whites populated the region. This reliance on not just the past, but an Afro-Caribbean past for the artists' subject matter reflects the ideological nature of the canvas art form to appropriate racial stereotypes in the formation of a symbolic identity.

Negrín claims to be rescuing the culture of Afro-Costa Ricans through his paintings. He says he paints Afro-Caribbean themes because of the richness of their culture and history. Concerning the selection of subject matter, he paints from memory about how Limón was thirty or so years ago. His philosophy about painting is to 'rescue that culture of Limón, the lost traditions of the races'. He wants to invoke images of the past and remind people of the way Limón once was. Negrín explains his position in the

epigraph at the beginning of this chapter, adding that 'now the culture is the same as anywhere in Costa Rica. My job is to rescue the old culture'.

This same attachment to the past is evident in the work of other canvas artists in Limón. William Duran explains: 'I like to paint the past more than the present. Because the past in Limón in my time was much nicer than today. More mild, people more concerned with their work. Less this, less that. Better. So I like to paint those days'. A young Afro-Costa Rican artist in his twenties, says he paints nostalgic themes 'because everything is being lost. It is to recover some of this culture, maybe. It is important, for our children and things like that. Like me, for my daughter maybe I can teach her something that maybe has already disappeared'.

This concept of 'rescuing the past' as it appears in the statements of Limonense artists illustrates the relationship between art and collective memory. The various ethnic groups in Limón all share a history of displacement, whether that be from the Central Valley, the Caribbean Islands, or as far away as Europe or China. As such, history plays a rather ambiguous role in the formation of identity among Limonenses, and while the roots of experience remain relatively shallow, the conceptual roots of an idealised past continue to deepen. Art materialises this idealised past in graphic form, allowing a socially constructed collective memory to fill the gap left by the lack of historical continuity. In this way, artists are not so much rescuing the past as they are reconstructing the past.

The value artists place on the past is only a reflection of the wider Limonense context. One Afro-Costa Rican comments on the Limón he knew as a child: 'This was beautiful. This was something different. You don't see no drugs. You don't see no robbers. It was beautiful. We don't have no bars on the windows or things like that. No,

no, no, Limón was something different. Limón was beautiful'. Images of an Eden-like existence are common with many Limonenses, referring to times when the main city park, Parque Vargas, was the cleanest in Costa Rica or how the suburbs of Limón were filled with tropical fruits free for the taking.

The popular conception of the past as somehow more desirable than the present is also evident in the market demand for nostalgic themes in the local artists' work. As one white Costa Rican artist explains: 'The city is too modern, people want paintings of the older, more rural countryside'. When asked if patrons told him this, he answered no, 'but I know that people prefer to see the landscapes with the little houses and trees and water'. Other artists echo this same sentiment, illustrating how the connection to the past through art is as much their own inspiration as it is an issue of supply and demand.

This trend is perhaps not so surprising when we think of Maurice Halbwachs' observations on collective memory and the reconstruction of the past: 'there is a kind of retrospective mirage by which a great number of us persuade ourselves that the world of today has less colour and is less interesting than it was in the past' (Halbwachs 1992:48). Halbwachs believes this is an escapist response to the mounting pressures of society as an individual matures, but there is more at work in this phenomenon. In the case of Limón, there is less a desire to leave the present for the past than a desire to bring the past to bear on the present. Halbwachs himself asserts that 'even at the moment of reproducing the past our imagination remains under the influence of the present social milieu' (Halbwachs 1992:49). It is the contemporary dynamic of ethnic identity and race rhetoric that influences the reconstructed memory of Limonenses as presented in canvas art. By glorifying an Afro-Caribbean past, Limonenses attach their own value to what has historically been devalued in Costa Rican society, thereby gaining some leverage in the

arena of identity politics. Inevitably this process influences the collective perception of the past, for 'however convinced we are that our memories are exact, we give them a prestige that reality did not possess' (Halbwachs 1992:51).

In light of this perspective, the emphasis on the past in Limón canvas art is more than just a nostalgic remembrance that meets the aesthetic goals of artists and the demands of the market. It is also a powerful way to connect to the emergent Limonense identity, which is founded on the collective conception of the historical context of the region. One artist explains that to paint Limón as it is today would make it indistinguishable from the rest of Costa Rica. The goal for the artists is to highlight those themes and subjects that are uniquely Limonense, and therefore useful in the construction of a unifying identity. As Graburn observes: 'those arts – the inwardly directed arts – that are made for, appreciated, and used by peoples within their own part-society . . . have important functions in maintaining ethnic identity and social structure, and in didactically instilling values in group members' (Graburn 1976:4-5). While this observation may err on the side of functionalism, the salient point remains that canvas art presents a particularly graphic form of cultural discourse in regard to identity and its links to the past.

The historical context of the region includes the racial stereotypes that have endured since Afro-Caribbeans first arrived at the turn of the century. One white Costa Rican artist explains that 'Limón was thrown aside by the rest of Costa Rica for a long time. At first it was because there were a lot of blacks here and racism was very strong. Now it continues because of the reputation that was created'. The separation from the rest of Costa Rica felt by the different ethnic groups in Limón outlined in chapters Three and Four is vibrantly expressed in the canvas art of Limonenses. Another white Costa

Rican artist points out that 'Limón is not 100 percent black anymore because whites have come from all over. But when we speak of Limón we speak of blacks. So when I paint a scene, to remember that it is Limón, I paint a black figure. . . . People don't like the paintings with white people. If you paint a black person, people see it and say, "Limón!"".

The appropriation of racial stereotypes by Afro-Costa Rican and white Costa Rican artists in Limón illustrates the discursive power of this particular expressive form. In the presentation of these stereotypes, the artists offer a graphic catalyst to empowerment for the disparate ethnic groups of Limón. The images become a rallying point for that ideology of blackness that constantly vies for cultural dominance. Yet, this process also carries risk of internalisation by Afro-Costa Ricans, leading to dis-empowerment and dis-unity as individuals seek to distance themselves from an image of blackness that highlights their social and economic vulnerability.

Artists can also implement the ideological power of the canvas art form in other ways. One white Costa Rican artist breaks with the work of the others in his placement of whites in the historical context. He talks about the changes in contemporary Limón, and how blacks no longer dominate the region. His paintings clearly express his view of Limón as a white province, but goes one step further in his interpretation of the past. Many of his works portray the same nostalgic landscapes of the Limón style, but by placing whites where blacks normally appear, he rewrites the history of the landscape, re-inscribing it with a white face. This artist uses the power of aesthetic expression to legitimise the white presence in Limón by re-writing the origin myth of the region to include whites.

Another startling example of this practice hangs in the appliance store downtown.

The owner commissioned a portrait of his father to be painted by a local artist. The finished canvas is a beach scene in the typical Limón style, with the father, a white Costa Rican, facing the viewer and two Afro-Costa Rican figures facing him at a small table (see Figure 5.3). The jarring insertion of the white figure into the Afro-Caribbean world of Limón canvas art composition no doubt inspires a myriad different reactions. One could easily suggest that the collaboration between white artist and white patron produced the image of whites inserting themselves into the Afro-Costa Rican world where blacks become marginalised and ignored. One could also argue that the patron is trying to situate his legacy in the Afro-Costa Rican milieu of Limón, a conclusion not too far fetched in light of his comments that 'Limón will always be based on black culture' and 'when we grew up we adopted that culture . . . we were a part of that'. Regardless of any given interpretation of the piece, it is an example of the discursive power of canvas art to re-inscribe the Afro-Caribbean past.

Despite the two examples given above that situate white Costa Ricans in the region's idyllic past, the general focus on blackness as Limón's cultural foundation remains the stylistic norm. This focus on blackness is notable for the inter-ethnic collaboration of white and Afro-Costa Ricans that comprise the informal association of artists. Though some of the above evidence points to the constraints of the local market on the subject matter for Limonense canvas art, this is only a partial explanation. Blackness, in its less essentialised association with a racial category, is an inclusive notion of identity, much like the amorphous power outsiders perceive it to possess. As such, both white and Afro-Costa Rican artists, self-identified with Limón, are able to connect with its claims on the cultural foundation of the region and the city. The result is an almost uniform emphasis on an Afro-Caribbean past in canvas art, giving discursive

space to a non-discursive experience of a much more flexible notion of blackness than that which is normally presented as an essentialised racial category.

The stylistic emphasis on the past in Limón canvas art is not entirely ideological in its influence on the formation of cultural identity. Both the artists who compose the pieces and the neighbours, friends and family who purchase them are part of the multi-ethnic community of Puerto Limón that continues to struggle with an endemic identity crisis. The images of Limón as it once was, or perhaps never was, offers an anchor point in collective experience. Not a first-hand experience of the past itself, but an experience of the dominant images associated with their particular cultural context. These images are incorporated into the Limón aesthetic as one more layer of experience, easily referenced by its potently graphic form.

There is a danger, however, in placing too much emphasis on the past in its relation to contemporary identity politics. Quince Duncan, in his short story, 'Demasiado Peso', captures the intersection of past and present in Limón life and its influence on the identity crisis felt by many Limonenses:

> Here I go down this mean street. Absurd! It jus' drag on and on farther than the eye can see. And I carry my burden, this cold, slow, black agony, exactly to this spot. Who would believe it? When I was a child I walked through these same streets with tapeworms tearin' me to pieces. Then I was a pot-bellied kid and I remember it almost with pride . . . Life was sweet then. Maybe I can go back now, to those dry sea shells, roarin' in the sun and mist, shinin' on the sand wet by sea and rain. Maybe I can go back and leave it there in the hole the tortoise used to dig on the beach. Maybe I can go back.
>
> . . .
>
> When dawn came they found his body as rigid as an oak tree with his feet anchored in the sand. On the beach next to his feet there were two words traced out by one rough finger: 'HEAVY BURDEN'. No one had time to figure out the meaning these might have had. It was enough for everyone to comment on his strange way of dying erect, defying time (Duncan 1995:105-107).

Much of Limón life is involved with the peculiar balance between carrying the burden of the past and struggling to avoid stagnation, a cultural 'dying erect, defying time'.

Duncan's story is a cautionary tale for all Limonenses who see value in an idealised past,

but are unable to bear the heavy burden of its significance for the present. As new cultural forms arise to meet the challenges inherent in the contemporary context, the concomitant influences of times past build on one another not as historical means to a modern end, but as part of the process of identity formation that is always historical and always ongoing.

Style and Re-Creativity

The nostalgic portrayal of early Afro-Caribbean settlers is only one of the more prominent characteristics of a uniform Limonense canvas art style that is too predictable for some artists, and so controlled that innovation is rare. One artist describes his frustration: 'But it's not only this style that I can paint. I can paint other styles. This is something because the people here like this style very much. I paint this style because the people like it and I can sell more. Maybe if I go to the US, San José, I could use other styles maybe'. He goes on to say: 'I want to paint something my own. . . . I have ideas in my head, other paintings, other works in pencil so I don't forget them, but yes, other styles'. He recognises the collective style as necessary in the Limonense context, and to branch out stylistically would require moving away from the city. Another artist goes so far as to say that those who move to San José immediately and inevitably change their style of painting, implying style is always constrained by environment.

While Negrín is largely responsible for the technical aspects of the Limón style, it is important to reiterate that he cannot bear sole responsibility. Artists like German Mora and Rommel Spence, who never sought Negrín as a teacher, also follow this basic style. When asked why all canvas artists tend toward the same style, the response invariably

includes the demands of the local art market. Few Limonense painters command an international reputation like that of Negrín in his prime. As a result, they depend mostly on local patrons who often dictate exactly what they desire in the finished product.

This local market is different from the anonymous economic system of larger Western cities: it is driven by neighbours, friends and relatives. Because the canvas art form in Limón is rooted in community and collectivity, non-artists are implicit collaborators in the creative process. This is true not only because they are the subject matter for the compositions, but because the paintings themselves, as aesthetic expressions, are re-creations of collective experience. As such, it is a logical response for local consumers, as collaborators in the lived experience of the community, to collaborate in the re-creation of that experience on canvas.

The uniformity of style again raises the analogy with the early Renaissance in Italy, where 'the artistic labour process [took] place entirely in collective forms' (Hauser 1951:48). With the later Renaissance came the glorification of individual artists, which is also evident in contemporary Limón. Local art consumers will select a particular artist because of the way he may use colour in a slightly more vibrant manner, or the way he more accurately (or inaccurately) renders an Afro-Caribbean figure, or perhaps simply because he charges less for his work. Still, the end product falls into the same uniform style that pervades the Limonense canvas art market. In extreme cases, a patron may approach an artist to render the same painting previously executed several times or even executed by a another artist.

Ricardo Rose, an Afro-Costa Rican artist, lives in Cieneguita in the half-finished shell of his new concrete house. He claims the new house came from selling his art, though curiously Ricardo rarely has enough capital to purchase paints and canvas much

less building materials. Much of his monetary success comes from his stylistic consistency and his ability to paint to order for customers. When asked about the roles of originality and reproduction in his work, Ricardo explains: 'I don't ever copy. Sometimes if someone wants a painting of something I have done before, I will do it, but I don't like to do that. I always try to do something a little different'. Rose identifies philosophically with the Western contemporary artist in his fidelity to the ideal of originality. He views copying old compositions as selling out. Even if he has to paint something similar to what he has painted before, as long as there is at least one component slightly different, for him it is an entirely new painting. Rose indicates he feels he is 'creating a world' in his painting, but not in the abstract sense of modernist aesthetic philosophy. He is faithful to the natural and social world he knows. His work is drawn from nature, but Rose qualifies that by adding his imagination, his creative influence to the actual world.

German Mora, a white Costa Rican artist, shares much of Rose's aesthetic philosophy. Mora, who also lives in a half-finished concrete house in one of the more 'up-scale' barrios of the city, is known as one of the more technically proficient artists in Limón (see Figure 5.3 and detail on title page). His rendering of human figures approaches a more exact portraiture than most other artists. The few times we spoke in the small living area of his home, Mora emphasised the relationship between knowledge and representation. Mora claims that as artists, Limonenses 'only have the knowledge that God gave us, nothing more'. When asked if he felt he was himself a creator or merely representing creation, he responded, 'I am representing creation'. He quickly qualified this with, 'but I want to advance, I have to study to create with my art'. His association between knowledge and the ability to create foreshadows the discussion of

abstraction below, but it also illustrates the Limonense artistic subordination of creativity to *a priori* creation.

As Rose, Mora and others paint and complete a painting, they have made something to be experienced in the lifeworld of Limonenses. The 'creation' is a re-combination of pre-existent components, both physical (the paint, canvas, etc.) and conceptual (the images of nature and the human form). More accurately, it is a re-creation of what the artists experience in the everyday life of Limón combined with their conceptual responses to that experience. The product is a material reality, an embodied experience, that itself becomes an integral part of everyday existence in Limón. The artist has not created anything original, in the sense that it was formed from nothing, out of itself, but he has added a layer of experience to the world which is as much as any artist in any context can hope to accomplish. As Mora comments: 'I like the things that God has made . . . but maybe with a bit more colour, nothing more than a little, something you could not see in a photograph'. It is in this way that artists may participate with rather than take the place of a monotheistic concept of a Creator God; through the attachment of value to experience. Within this paradigm, just as Adam participated in creation by giving value to existence through 'naming the animals', artists participate in creativity by naming experience, placing value on experience, and thereby adding new experience to the life-world of others. The essence of human creativity - and what legitimates the artistic process in Limón canvas art - is the capacity to 'collaborate with and complete' (Dufrenne 1973:167) creation through the naming of experience. It is not to create from nothing 'like unto God', but to participate with God in the ordering of the created world, the world that is actually there outside ourselves in which we live and move and have our being.

It is in this process of re-creation and experience that the dual development of identity and aesthetics becomes more clear. In the value-laden re-creation of experience through canvas art, Limonense artists present static symbols around which the community may organise. The result is a symbolic ethnicity rooted in generalised concepts of blackness rather than actual historical experience. The art products become agents of identity, material extensions of the ideal which assert themselves in the perceptive field of Limonenses. But, as we saw in the development and deterioration of Carnaval, as the ideal is made real it becomes susceptible to an experiential transformation. Each moment of perception enacts a dialectic between the conceptual ideology of a symbolic ethnicity and the lived experience of a more fragmented notion of Limonense identity. These moments of perception and expression make up the aesthetic system which perpetuates the dialectic in the on-going negotiation of collective identity.

Representation and the Idolatry of Abstraction

The representational technique of Limonense canvas artists is closely related to the issue of style and re-creativity. It is also closely related to the wide-spread identity crisis of Limón. The same self-deprecating attitude that internalises stereotypes imposed by outsiders who have failed repeatedly to come to grips with Limón as part of the national cultural landscape bleeds into the work of the artists who associate their representational style with backward primitivism. The result is an idolatry of abstraction as the evolutionary goal of the 'educated artist'.

Limonense canvas artists are keenly aware of the stylistic differences between their work and the work produced in other regions of Costa Rica. As the economic and

cultural centre of the nation, San José is the first step in launching an international reputation. But many artists find San José an inhospitable environment for their work, and prefer to sell within Puerto Limón or outside the country. William Duran claims that 'in San José they have expositions for groups of artists, and we barely sell any'. German Mora explains: 'For example, I brought my painting to a gallery in San José, and they said, "No, that's not like typical Costa Rican art. Typical Costa Rican art has adobe houses". So it was rejected. But I think the people of the gallery . . . should support what is typical of Limón as well'. Other painters, like Rommel Spence, who inspired the title for this thesis, echo this position: 'In San José, on that side of the country, you can see various other styles that are similar to each other. If you go to Guanacaste you will find something different, Puntarenas, another style, and so on for different provinces. Yes, because people will surely paint with the vision they see'.

The artists' responses offer a unified defence of their work within the Limonense artist community, but they also mask an internalisation of national stereotypes that characterise Limón as uneducated and primitive. Abstract artists like Mario Castro and Juan Kelly, both Limonenses but trained as artists in San José, are described as having more 'knowledge' than local painters. There is a consistent contrast in the words of painters and local collectors between the academic, educated work of artists outside Limón and the 'primitive' work of Limonense artists.

The persistent association between artistic evolution and distance from Limón is evident in many of the artists' responses. One artist would like to develop his talent, but feels he would have to leave Limón to pursue that development. One reason he gives is his audience: 'I work for common people and they can't understand these very complicated things that come from those who study art at the University'. This attitude

not only demonstrates an idolatry of art knowledge and the mysteriously 'complicated things' one may grasp in that knowledge, it also underestimates the ability of Limonenses to develop along with their resident artists. Still, the artist feels his realist portrayals of Limón life demonstrate a lack of 'knowledge' that would enable him to paint in a more expressive style. He explains: 'I would have to go to San Jose . . . the USA or Italy or Mexico . . . to understand the latest, what they are doing in art today. I don't want to stay where I am because maybe that's why they say we are primitive. We are not modern, we only have the knowledge that God gave us, nothing more, without study'. As referenced earlier, German Mora associates increased knowledge with the power to move past God-given primitivism and on to the modernist notion of artistic creation. In this sense, art knowledge achieves mythic status as the key to artistic power - the power to create.

The association between knowledge and creativity is not reserved for artists. One of the largest collections of Limonense art can be found in an appliance store in downtown Limón. The owner, a white Costa Rican whose family originally came to Limón from Belize, describes the few works by Mario Castro hanging in his shop as more advanced than other Limonense artists. For him, the work of local artists is 'primitive, untrained and raw'. His appreciation for their work is evident in the impressive collection of canvases, but he still feels they lack proper training.

Other artists recognise the lure of academic training and abstraction as a negative development in Limón art. One artist explains: 'There are those in San José who decide who is good and who is bad. I saw on television someone say that the painters in Limón are copiers, just copying nature. And I say, what painter in the world doesn't paint their surroundings? It is the source of all our art'. His comment eerily echoes a similar observation by Merleau-Ponty: '*Another world* - by this we mean the same world that the

painter sees and that speaks his own language, only freed from the nameless weight which held it back and kept it equivocal. How would the painter or poet express anything other than his encounter with the world?' (Merleau-Ponty 1993:93). The artist quoted above goes on to discuss Limonense artists like Mario Castro who after moving away from Limón developed a more abstract style: 'He [Castro] uses very brilliant colours and abstract designs, but for me his style is very academic. Many very good painters left here and went into the University and immediately became academic about their art. Like Juan Kelly and Mario Castro, all of them immediately changed their painting'. This artist sees his development as an internal evolution that does not require formal training: 'I feel I need more experience, more within the art. I don't know what the new style will be, I don't have a timetable, I feel it will just happen'. He demonstrates an openness to change, but one that grows organically out of his work, rather than academically out of a university far removed from the street where he sets his easel every day.

Still, many in Limón speak of their dissatisfaction with the constraints of their style and of their desire to follow in the footsteps of the now legendary Mario Castro and Juan Kelly. The Limón style to which local artists ascribe a fickle loyalty illustrates the power of cultural specificity in aesthetic expression. Even as it reveals 'a certain vital relation to the world' (Dufrenne 1973:109), the Limón style brings into focus all the conflict that Limón suffers in that relation. As mediators and prophets of the tenuous relationship between Limón and the outside world, it is no wonder many canvas artists have internalised the stereotypes they express so boldly in their art. As a result, many long to escape the reality of collective anonymity and national ostracism for the abstract ideal of artistic notoriety and social acceptance.

In light of this trend, it is important to examine what this elusive and apparently

potent knowledge attainable outside Limón has done to the work of those painters who managed to acquire it. Interestingly, Mario Castro, one of the more prominent of this small group of artists, still paints nostalgic, Afro-Caribbean themes albeit in an abstract style. Using a collage approach that breaks the canvas up into different sections, Castro inserts stylised old wooden houses and dark skinned figures into scenes washed in bright yellows, greens and blues (see Figure 5.4). Eulalia Bernard, the well-known Limonense poet and scholar in Afro-American studies, takes some credit for Castro's development: 'He took an Afro-American studies course with me and that made him more aware of his Caribbean heritage in a more conscious way. He has it unconsciously, but its not the same when you bring it up to the surface and confront it academically'. The implication is that in his old way of painting, the traditional Limón style, he had only an unconscious grasp of his Caribbean heritage. Once that heritage was made conscious and 'confronted academically', Castro was able to abstract a reflexive, conceptual ideal of his own identity as a Limonense and transfer that abstraction to the canvas. The Cartesian ideal of distance and objectification is physically acted out in the process of academicising the art of Limonense painters. Literally removing themselves from the cultural context in the move to San José, artists are able to objectify and comment on the Limón environment. The abstract and highly stylised result is an insightful example of how privileging discursive meaning over lived experience often offers only distorted images of the cultural processes we seek to understand.

Apart from an abstract critique of Cartesian epistemology, the emphasis on representation and the idolatry of abstraction that permeates much of Limonense canvas art illustrates the local conflict between ideology and lived experience as it exists on a number of different levels. On a general level, the conflict illustrates the

interconnectedness of aesthetics and identity as both sort through the relationship between ideal forms and intuitive experience. The conflict also points to the struggle within the local artist community between the idealised notion of creative autonomy and the more mundane reality of canvas art rooted in the everyday activity of Limón life. The irony of course is that in terms of a textual discourse or linguistically 'readable' meaning in the paintings of Negrín's association and those from the art schools of San José, both deal in abstractions; it is a matter of intensity not existence. The historicity of local canvas art is no less tangential to the reality of Limón's past than that of more 'academic' artists, but the representational style and the manner in which it is produced situates the expressive form in Limonense experience in a way paintings from San José or California cannot duplicate.

Finally, the conflict between perceptions of local art work and that of more educated artists raises the issue of legitimacy versus authenticity. The concept of legitimacy, especially artistic legitimacy, is the product of certain socially constructed boundaries of acceptability; who is and is not an artist. As with the racialisation of space, this is most often a top down process in a social hierarchy. The notion of authenticity is one that operates below the radar of legitimacy where aesthetic expressions may connect with experience without legitimate credentials. To be clear, the use of authenticity in this analysis is not concerned with claims as to who or what is more 'truly' Limonense (see Jackson 1988:16), but it is used as a heuristic device to examine the situational conflict between various social levels. This conflict is evident in the relationship between Limonense canvas artists and the legitimate art world of the dominant Costa Rican society. But the dynamic between legitimacy and authenticity is potentially replicated a various points on the sliding scale of the social hierarchy. Thus, Negrín, operating below

the radar of Costa Rican artistic legitimacy, creates an authentic style that is then reified into a standard of local artistic legitimacy. The dynamism of this process is that for each boundary of legitimacy established, space is created for the pursuit of authenticity. Operating below the radar of Negrín's association and its standards of legitimacy are the artisans of a local co-operative. Outside the bounds of the 'legitimate' Limonense art world, participants in the co-operative are relegated to the status of artisans producing crafts much like Negrín and his fellow painters are categorised by Costa Ricans from the Central Valley. What is most revealing about this dynamic is the contextual nature of the categories, such that the same contingent, hierarchically structured distinctions made between artist and artisan are made throughout the various loci of identity formation.

The Craft Aesthetic

'Negrín has lost his talent, he just paints the same paintings over and over now. I don't know what that is, but it is not art'. These words came from a woman who has been excluded from the association of artists in Limón. Her frustration with Negrín in his association was apparent as she continued, 'Negrín is not concerned with the artistic process, with developing his creativity. He is happy with the success he has enjoyed and does not want to change. The artists in his group are afraid of him, of being shunned, so they just follow him. Negrín has the power to decide who is and is not an artist in Limón'.

Though her comments are obviously motivated by a sense of personal exclusion, her accusations are not without some basis. Negrín bases his power within the informal association of Limonense canvas artists upon his authorial knowledge of the successful

Limón style. Though overtly dismissive of any direct control over the association and its members, Negrín wields an exclusionary power that has frustrated many would-be artists in Limón. The result is a rather subjectively arbitrary distinction between art and craft based on the principles set up by Negrín and his association. Within this culturally specific aesthetic dichotomy, craft is defined as any visually expressive form not under the rubric of the Limón style in canvas art.

Obviously this is a catch-all category that demonstrates the power Negrín rather tacitly wields in the local art community. Negrín maintains the power to legitimate or devalue any artist in Limón. The gate-keeping role of Negrín may contribute to the glaring absence of women within the Limón artist community. Many consider Vera Beatriz, one of the only female canvas artists, to be a great patron of the arts in Limón, but her work strays from the Limón style and, ostensibly, this precludes her involvement in Negrín's association. One male artist claimed that he and others would like to support her, as she has supported them, but they fear Negrín would ostracise them from his association. Vera feels her exclusion is an insidious result of patriarchy and an endemic *machismo* that restricts women from certain social roles.

In short, according to Vera and other Limonense women, the distinction between artist and artisan is more a gender distinction than an aesthetic one. The result, however, is a clear aesthetic distinction between the products of male canvas artists and the mostly female craft artisans. Two important aspects of the craft aesthetic in Limón are the speed of production in contrast to oil painting and the economic constraints of the various craft products. Both aspects are directly related to the cultural differentiation of gender in Limón, and both exert an expanding influence on the 'legitimate' art community.

Many Limonense women feel the gender split among artists and artisans in Limón

is due to the way their community socialises women into constant domestic productivity. One woman complained of the restrictive double standard in the socialisation of children. She described how from an early age men are given more freedom to experiment with different vocations. Women are restricted from the beginning, trained only for the domesticity expected of them: 'I always wanted to learn to play the piano, but I could either learn cooking or sewing. Even now, if I wanted to, I can't find anyone who could teach me how to play the piano'. The skills required for domestic life in Limón demand much of young women's free time growing up, and later, men continue to enjoy more leisure time to develop talents. Even in full-time employment, men enjoy set hours and a set wage which legitimise their leisure. Women, who have no set hours and no set remuneration, are considered idlers if they devote too much time to artistic interests.

As a result, women are left with small increments of time to devote to creative interests. By necessity, these interests are channelled into pieces which take little time and offer more immediate gratification than large canvas paintings. Whether they are crocheting trinkets for the home or assembling ash trays and figurines out of coconut husks, women still act on the urge to express themselves despite exclusion from the locally constructed bounds of artistic legitimacy. Even if these smaller, more easily produced pieces are relegated to the status of crafts good only for personal gratification or sale to day-tripping cruise passengers, they are participating in the cultural aesthetic system of Limón.

The instant gratification associated with the speed of production is tied to the economic constraints of the various crafts. This includes the kinds of materials used and produced, but also the way in which the products are marketed and consumed.

One of the most notable characteristics of Limón craft work is the use of found or

prefabricated materials. Whereas most canvas artists start with the most basic raw materials, Limonense artisans usually use whatever is on hand. Their finished products are often the result of embellishments on common objects: a store-bought mirror becomes a vibrant decoupage piece with plantation scenes or some plaster fruit; a plain T-shirt becomes a canvas for the bust of an Afro-Caribbean woman or beach scene. This aspect of Limonense craft work illustrates the economics of the form, that is to say, women do not have the resources to procure expensive art supplies. It also illustrates the more generally human urge to order, and in some sense, beautify their environment. Joaquin Zuniga calls it 'the aesthetic impulse', where 'in various ways, human beings seem to be endlessly and hopelessly caught up in an urge to render the world around them an aesthetically pleasing one' (Zuniga 1989:43). In the same way that canvas artists may be participating in creation through the naming of experience, artisans are participating in the aestheticisation of Limón life through the embellishment of the ordinary. In effect, that's what craft work is to many women, a way to embellish their often restricted, ordinary lives, and as such, it is one example of a subtle challenge to the status quo of gender distinction.

Another aspect of the economics of craft work in Limón offers a not so subtle challenge to gender distinction in Limonense society. The small crafts which are quickly and inexpensively made lend themselves to the region's thriving tourist industry. Each summer, thousands of cruise passengers disembark for day trips through the country, and each year thousands more come to enjoy the beaches and exotic wildlife of the Atlantic coast. Seizing the opportunity to earn some extra income, local artisans formed a co-operative to meet the demands of an untapped tourist art market. Lobbying as a group, the co-operative gained access to the port and began selling to cruise ship passengers.

Because of their unwieldy size and cost, canvas art has offered no real competition to the now thriving tourist craft trade.

What makes this trend important is the predominantly female membership of the artisan co-operative. Women have placed themselves in positions of leadership, operating outside the bounds of local artistic legitimacy. A similar trend is visible in the local marketing of art and crafts. Vera Beatriz runs an art school and gallery which sells both the crafts of the artisans and the paintings of canvas artists. Marta Gamboa moved from the Central Valley to open another art school and gallery. Until Marta and Vera opened their galleries, local canvas artists depended on word of mouth or the rare exhibition in San José.

Now that women have assumed the role of art brokers for local artists, there has been a decentralisation of power within the art community. Namely, the dis-empowerment of Negrín. One canvas artist, complaining about the exclusivity of Negrín's association, offered: 'But there are other associations beside Negrín's. Marta is more versatile, she has many contacts. She is very prepared, and has more diplomacy'. In this sense, Marta and Vera could be compared to the famous Afro-Caribbean 'higglers' of Jamaica and the early days of Limón. Higglers were female go-betweens who marketed the produce of farmers to potential consumers, side-stepping the usual gender restrictions of women in the marketplace (Clarke 1957; Lefever 1992). In light of this historical precedent, it is perhaps not surprising that women would be the ones to assume the role of go-betweens in the informal art market of Limón. Just as Jamaican higglers responded to their exclusion from production by appropriating their own economic space, local female art dealers are appropriating their own space in the Limonense cultural aesthetic system. Interestingly, both Marta and Vera are white Costa Ricans, yet another

example of the rather complex intersection of history, ethnicity and identity in Limón.

The role of gender distinction in the plastic arts of Puerto Limón reflects a common thread running through the entire aesthetic system. This relates directly to the analytic opposition I have introduced as legitimacy versus authenticity, where gender, in the overall process of identity formation, is a modality of blackness such that both challenge dominant boundaries by connecting to local experience through aesthetic practice.

Cultural Production and Identity Formation

One common characteristic of Limonense canvas art and the craft work of artisans that makes their differentiation problematic from the start is their connectedness to the surrounding community. Both expressive forms are woven into the fabric of everyday life in Limón. Whether it is the painter meticulously filling a canvas amidst the urban sprawl of the city centre, or the artisan piecing together ordinary materials in the kitchen of a suburban house, both carry out their aesthetic practice as an extension of everyday life.

The role that each has to play in the process of cultural production and identity formation is somewhat more complex for the canvas artists. Not because of any objective aesthetic hierarchy between the two mediums, but because of the perceived status of canvas art and its characteristically graphic expression. For the canvas artists, their integration into the lifeworld of Limonenses brings into sharp relief the ideological nature of their medium, and experiential character of everyday life, both in production and appreciation.

As a graphic medium, especially in the representational nature of the Limón style, Limón canvas art carries a certain ideological power within the community. Through the collective Limón style, artists portray an idyllic, pre-urban world where Afro-Caribbeans dominate the landscape and few if any signs of modernity herald the encroachment of other groups. Reflecting the same ideology of black identity that inspired Carnaval and Negro Day, the Limón style offers up an essentialist image of the region and the city. Ironically, even as some local artists long for that elusive knowledge that enables stylistic abstraction, they participate in a conceptual abstraction of Limón's past and by implication their present and future.

The image presented in Limón canvas art is a conceptual abstraction in two crucially important ways. First, few if any of the compositions include city life. Second, few of the compositions include any ethnic group besides Afro-Caribbeans. The image of Limón is one of almost Eden-like pastoralism, where Afro-Caribbeans dot the landscape as if they rose from the earth. In this way, the canvas artists are inscribing the creation myth of Limón. Through their expressive form, they participate in the legitimisation of the Afro-Caribbean claim on the cultural foundations of the region and the city.

The ideological impact of the expressive form is made complete by the permanence of the form hanging on the walls of homes and businesses. There would be little impact on the local community if all Limonense artists enjoyed the same international success as Negrín. For most Limonense artists, their market is local, sometimes as local as their own barrio. Those who cannot afford a painting might at least have a few photo-copied reproductions or have seen them hanging in businesses in the city centre. As mute objects, the paintings become silent subtle reminders of blackness and its claim on the Limón identity. Though some may be able to discern a given artist's

particular use of colour or talent for rendering the human form, most simply see the collective style, depersonalised and constantly speaking to that ideological claim.

Like Carnaval and Negro Day, this idealisation is the product of dis-placement. The plantation society created at the turn of the century brought labourers from all over the Caribbean and Central America, and by the twists and turns of history, these labourers and all of the cultural baggage they brought with them stayed on to carve out a living. The inevitable struggle for cultural stability was characterised by the kind of crab antics described by Peter Wilson (1973), though on a more collective level.

For the most part, the cultural dominance of Afro-Caribbeans has prevailed, helped along by the prejudices of Costa Rican outsiders who have stigmatised the region and all her inhabitants. But history continues to twist and turn, and as demographics and cultural patterns shift, so do the allegiances to ideological abstractions of collective identity.

Part of this process involves the phenomenology of the aesthetic system that creates an undercurrent to conceptual ideology, continually destabilising its claims based on the evolution of experience. What makes the phenomenology of the aesthetic system so powerful a cultural force is that it operates from two directions: through the artist at the level of expression; and through the consumer at the level of perception.

The Limonense canvas artist, who sets his easel in the streets of the barrios throughout the city, is intimately aware of his cultural and material surroundings (see Figure 5.5). As he applies colour and form to a canvas which will express all the abstract ideological concepts of an essentialised black identity, he is also experiencing the everyday reality of ethnic synthesis that comprises his phenomenological lifeworld.

That experience contrasts sharply with the image conveyed on canvas. The gritty urbanness of the city surrounds him even as the artist portrays a pre-urban idyllic view of Limón. The predominantly white faces of the city's demographics surround him even as the artist portrays an enveloping blackness throughout the city and the region. The pre-eminence of experience dis-empowers the ideological influence of the expressive process and its finished product.

This dynamic is also at work in the perception of canvas art by local consumers. The category consumer may apply to anyone with the means to experience the images conveyed on canvas, and in Limón, that applies to almost everyone. This is true not only because of the wide diffusion of art pieces hanging on walls throughout the city, but also because the artists of each barrio are known by their relatives, friends, neighbours, or by reputation. As in the case of the expressive process, the ideological nature of the medium is undermined in the act of perception by the everyday activity of personal interaction with artists.

The artists are known, and as such, their art is personalised and participated in by the community. The rise of white Costa Rican artists painting Afro-Caribbean themes does not go unnoticed, and this affects the power of the collective Limón style to exert an influence in the construction of a collective identity. Moreover, many comment on the familiarity with the subject matter of various works. They may describe some works as portraits of local eccentrics or readily identify some stretch of beach. As the artists are known, so are their inspirations, and as a result, the process of perception becomes closely aligned with the process of expression. Consumers come to feel they are participating somehow in the artistic process simply by living their everyday lives in the city. As this develops, the paintings can no longer hang on the walls as depersonalised,

essentialist portrayals of Limón life. They take on new and unpredictable meanings as they are incorporated into everyday experience.

This phenomenological process is forcing artists and consumers to reckon with the ideological image of Limón of which canvas art is only one means of communication. What is important to realise is that this ideology is not the product of an organised agenda. Even the efforts of the UNIA discussed earlier are a legitimate call for intra-ethnic solidarity among Afro-Caribbeans in reaction to the prejudices and cultural isolation imposed by Costa Rican outsiders. The Limón canvas artists and their patrons are simply responding to, and affirming, the cultural claims made by the Afro-Caribbean community. The rising conflict between this affirmation and the changing influence of everyday experience indicates not so much a dismissal of the Afro-Caribbean claim as a reordering of influences in the process of identity formation.

This demonstrates the influence of aesthetic forms in this process. The canvas artists of Limón are concretising a way of knowing the surrounding cultural world so that Limonenses can deal with that image in a material way. They can hold it in their hands, step back and study it, or merely glance over the shoulder of Negrín in the city centre. In so doing, the community may begin to question the validity of the Limón aesthetic. This questioning inevitably leads to the role of ethnicity and gender in the joint process of aesthetic expression and identity formation.

As will be evident in subsequent chapters, the phenomenological process of identity formation among Limonenses is beginning to answer these questions. The cultural claim of Afro-Caribbeans on the identity of Limonenses has become the foundation upon which layers of experience are being laid. Women are becoming more and more the brokers of this new ethnic amalgamation, both materially and culturally, not

because it is being handed them, but because they are claiming it for themselves. While canvas art continues to materialise the ideology of black identity, it participates in the overall cultural aesthetic of Limón which assimilates such ideological forms into the phenomenology of aesthetic experience intimately associated with the formation of a cohesive, collective cultural identity.

Figure 5.1 and 5.2 ~ *With a few notable exceptions, the paintings portray a nostalgic image of Limón life peopled almost entirely by cartoon-like Afro-Caribbean figures. Details of a painting by Negrín.*

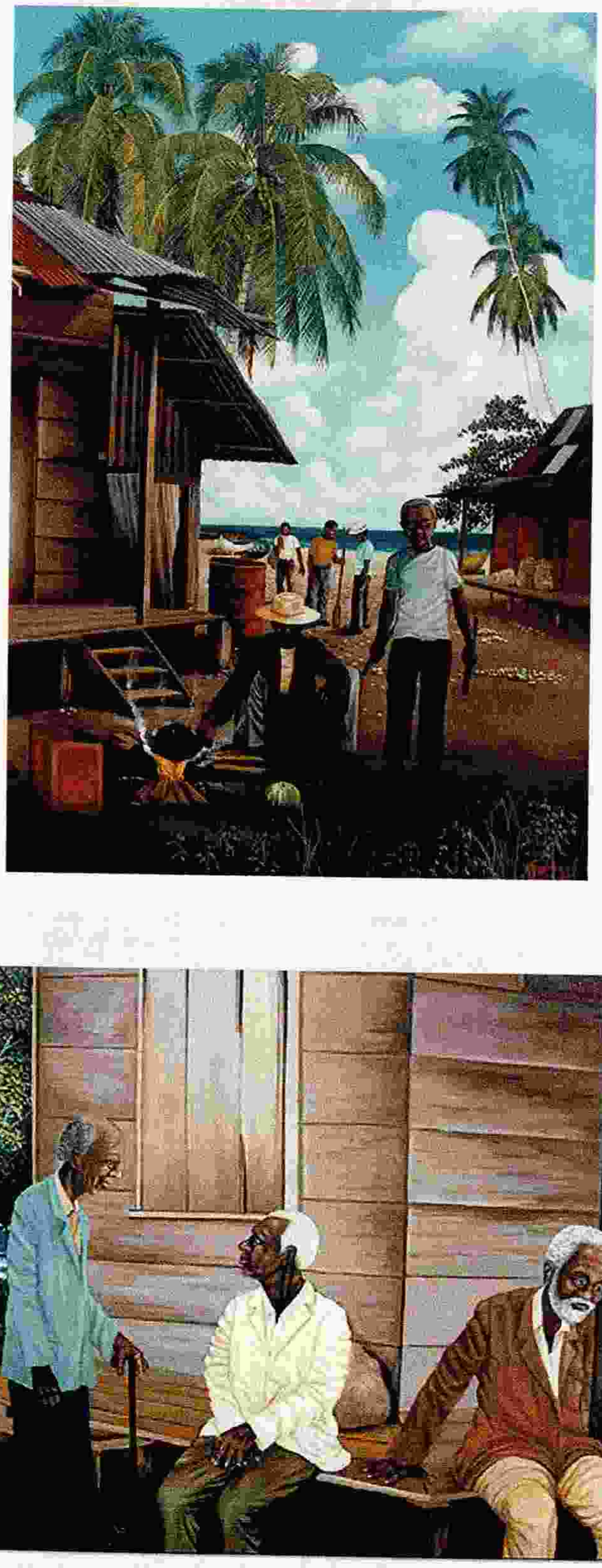


Figure 5.3 ~ *The jarring insertion of the white figure into the Afro-Caribbean world of Limón canvas art composition no doubt inspires a myriad different reactions. Painting by German Mora.*

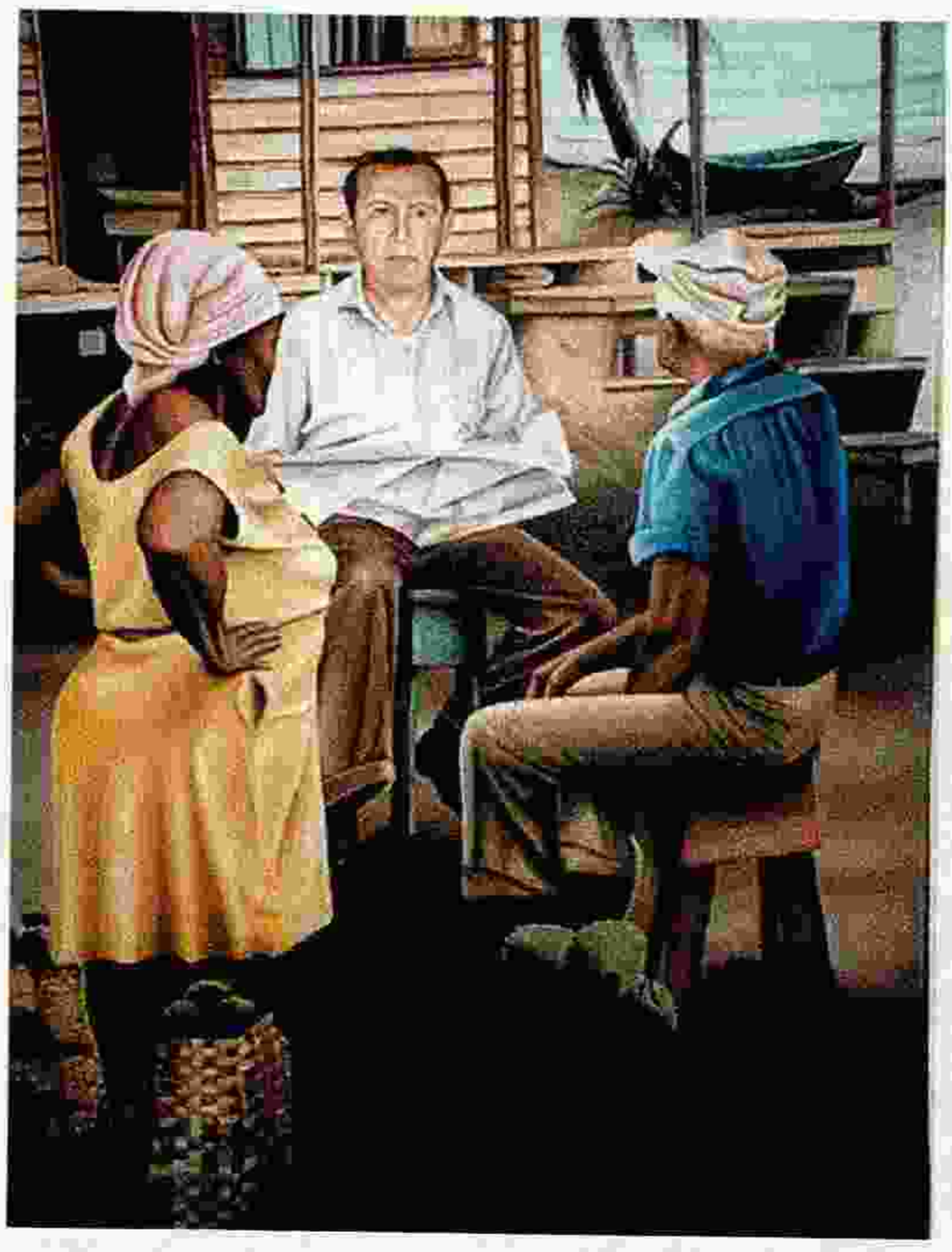


Figure 5.4 ~ *Using a collage approach that breaks the canvas up into different sections, Castro inserts stylised old wooden houses and dark skinned figures into scenes washed in bright yellows, greens and blues. Painting by Mario Castro.*

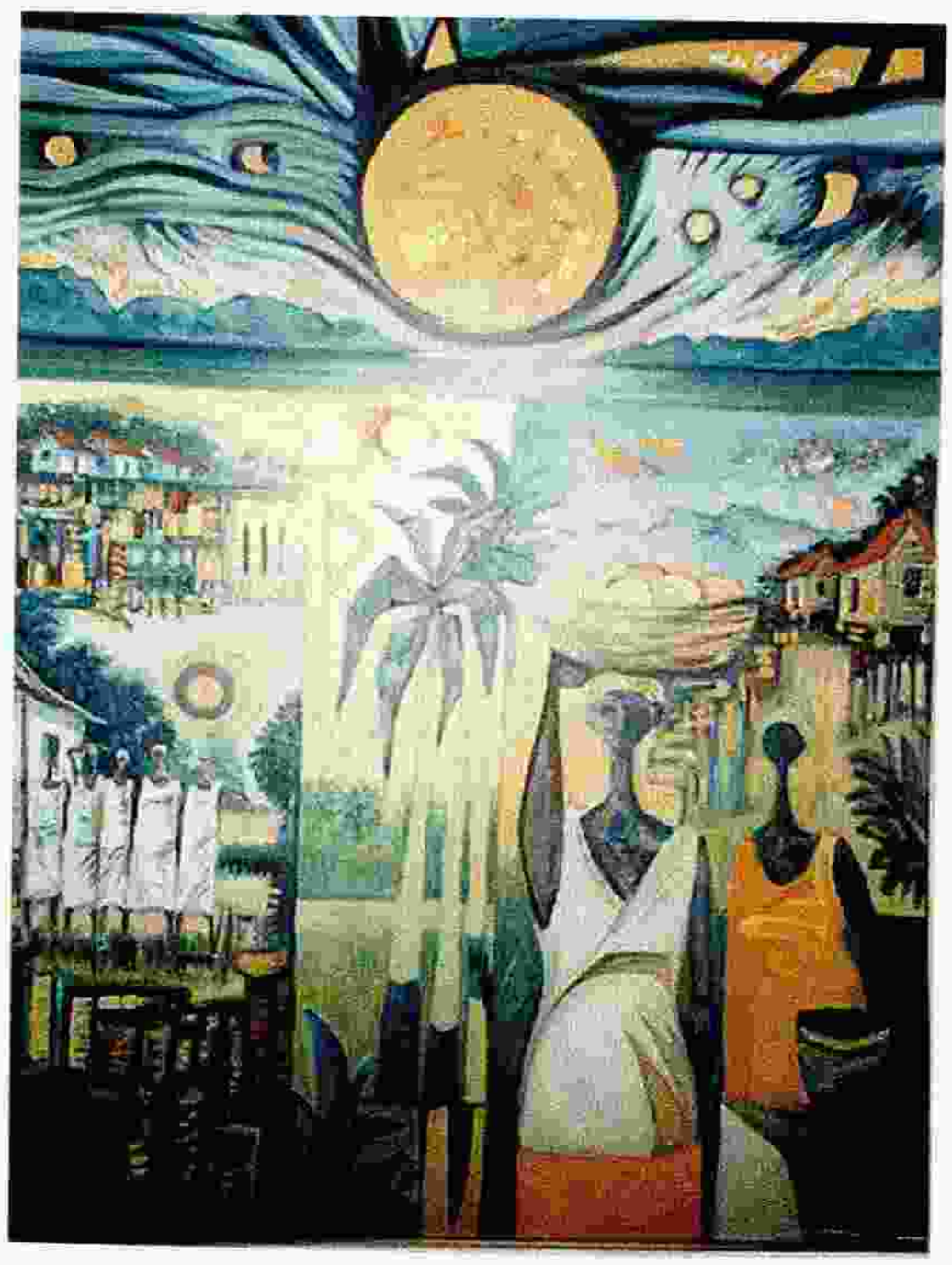
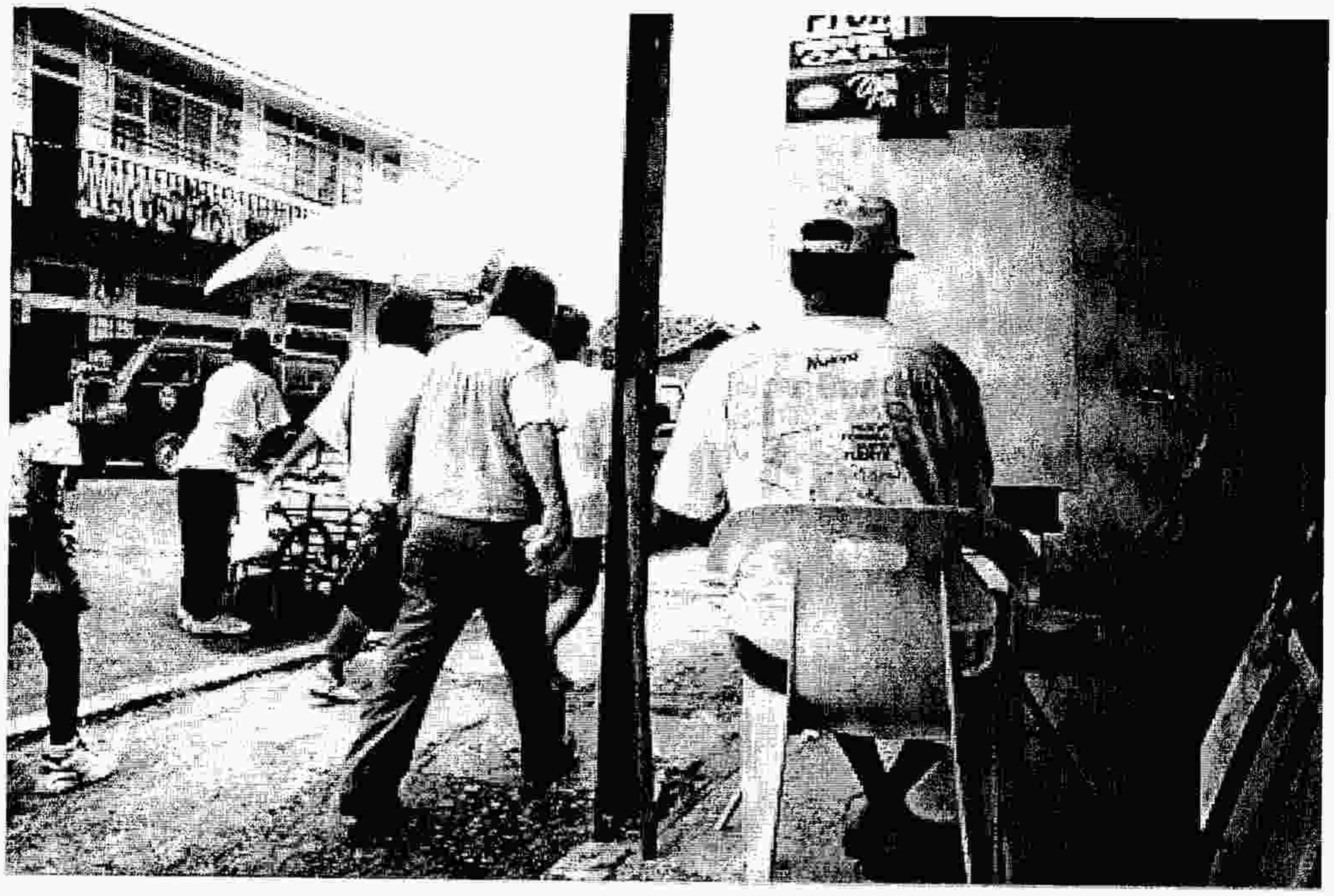


Figure 5.5 ~ *The Limonense canvas artist, who sets his easel in the streets of the barrios throughout the city, is intimately aware of his cultural and material surroundings. Photo of Negrín at work.*



CHAPTER SIX

MUSIC AND DANCE:

The Phenomenology of Performance

'So but our parents here, in those - talk'n many years ago - they had a . . .', Danny thought for a moment. He took another spoonful of arroz con mariscos, and with a sudden recollection spoke through a mouthful of rice and seafood, 'They used to call it a Tumba, they call it now a Conga, but they used to call it a Tumba. And they have the ukulele, they have the guitar, and they have - they used to take the calabash and make a scraper - and they sit there and start to sing calypsos and songs'.

Danny finally swallowed his food and continued to bake in the heat of his suburban patio waiting for the rhythm section of his comparsa band to arrive.

'The music of the comparsa is different. It's born in us. It's a thing that's born in us. You can here it play'n a pan, play'n something. You can have a table here - we hit'n the rhythm and we dance'n after that. 'Cause we feel it'.

Danny forgot about his lunch and leaned forward in his flimsy wire chair.

'We can just sing'n and dance'n at the same time without no music. We make music with our mouth. We take music . . . we, okay . . .' Frustrated with attempts to verbalise his thought, Danny spits out a staccato rhythm. The infectious beat travels to his hands which tap out an accompaniment on a small table before him.

He stops as surreptitiously as he began. '. . . and we start to feel the rhythm. It's something that's in the blood'.

Music permeates the lived experience of Limonenses. Whether it is the blaring stereos that flood the streets with rap, reggae, ska, and calypso, or the simple rhythms hammered out by children on cardboard boxes, music fills the aural background of everyday life. It is its ubiquitous presence in the mundane act of living that makes music so important to the Limón aesthetic.

Out of the aural background, music asserts itself into the foreground of Limonense activity where it is tied to performance and the embodiment of experience. In this context, musical performance becomes an extension of the ordinary into the specific and

specialised. Like canvas art, music and its embodied performance situate this practice in a meaningfully contextualised space in the process of establishing a sense of place. Performance, however, carries this further by putting embodiment in motion, moving through space and providing greater depth to the 'relocation' of place in a highly contested landscape. Martin Stokes asserts: 'the musical event, from collective dances to the act of putting a cassette or CD into a machine, evokes and organises collective memories and present experiences of place with an intensity, power and simplicity unmatched by any other social activity' (Stokes 1994:3). However much this may overstate the case, the fact remains that music and performance are powerful expressive forms in the overarching cultural aesthetic that permeates the process of identity formation.

The conflation of music and dance implied above deserves some attention before pursuing the topic further. One could argue that such a conceptual union blurs the boundary between two distinct expressive forms. Certainly, one could perform a dance without music or play a tune without dancing. But here I want to examine how music is embodied in performance, which includes musicians and the dancers for whom they often play. There remains a distinction between musician and dancer, at times a crucial one which will be discussed below, but this chapter approaches their relationship as symbiotic and mutually dependent. By focusing on embodiment in musical performance, the expressive form can be seen as not just 'static symbolic objects which have to be understood in a context', but rather as 'a patterned context within which other things happen' (Stokes 1994:5).

This chapter examines three specific forms of musical performance: calypso, school bands, and comparsas. Calypso bands represent the bedrock of Afro-Caribbean

musical inspiration, communicating the same conceptual nostalgia that characterises Limón canvas art. Carried across the Caribbean sea by parents and grandparents, Limón calypso links present experience with collective memory in a way that is inherently conceptual but also susceptible to experiential transformation. Limón school bands demonstrate the development of a unique Limonense performative style that builds on the traditions of calypso by adding other ethnic influences. The school bands socialise Limón youth into their inevitable link to the national socio-political context of Costa Rica even as they embody the cultural differences that have long justified a *de facto* exclusion from that context. It is through the embodiment of difference that school bands socialise the body into a culturally specific Limonense aesthetic, and prepare them for participation in the Limón comparsas. Finally, the Limón comparsa establishes itself as the quintessential Limón musical form, and offers an aesthetic model for a collective Limonense identity. Growing out of the annual celebration of Carnaval, the Limón comparsa illustrates the power of experience to inform the process of identity formation. As such, the Limón comparsa carries the cultural role of school bands a step further, embodying the flexibility and spontaneity that constitutes Limonense experience.

The Limón Calypso

During the course of fieldwork, nights on the town in Limón were rarely completely successful adventures. This was due as much to the stifling climate as to the relative dearth of interesting entertainment venues. The one exception was Antillitas. Mentioned in Chapter Four, Antillitas, a diminutive term for someone from the West Indies, is a regular venue for local calypso bands on the weekends. Owned by Afro-Costa Ricans

and overtly marketed as an Afro-Caribbean restaurant and bar, it is also one of the only commercial establishments located on the upper story of a building in the city centre. Besides the more theoretical implications of this design feature discussed earlier, it has the added benefit of generating a nice breeze at night.

Our first night at Antillitas we took in a performance by New Dimension, a calypso band lead by Reynaldo Kenton. The band straggled in one by one over the course of the evening, and after a few drinks and tinkering with instruments, they settled in to play. There was a drum kit, a wash-tub bass, electric guitar, acoustic guitar and the occasional tambourine or shaker. Dressed in matching red-striped shirts, the all Afro-Costa Rican band played in one corner of the restaurant cleared of tables. Most of the band members remained seated during the performance, with lead vocals sung by almost everyone in turn.

The mostly Afro-Costa Rican patrons who soon packed the restaurant were for the most part an audience to the calypso performance, talking loudly over the music to friends. One or two couples would get up to dance on the small dance floor for one of the songs, but most kept their seats. Just as I was making a mental note of the apparent boundary between the musicians and their audience, someone from the audience came forward and sang a particularly melancholic song of old times with the band. Later, another audience member played the tambourine. Both indicated a familiarity with the band members – obviously regulars. These rather jarring exceptions to the mostly staid audience not only demonstrated the dangerous of imposing conceptual boundaries too quickly, it also demonstrated a connection to the band and its music by at least some of the audience members who seemed to express a mournful nostalgia for times past.

Calypso bands have always been a part of the musical tradition of Afro-Costa Ricans. Carried across the Caribbean sea mainly from Jamaica, the calypso songs maintained an important connection between Afro-Caribbean settlers and the homes they left behind. Almost everyone knew the words and there was always someone who could strum along on a guitar.

Today the calypso tradition survives in the few scattered bands that play in restaurants and bars around town. Now the same homes that echoed with the choruses of the old calypso songs are filled with the sounds of rap and reggae. The youth have turned away from the 'home-made' traditional Afro-Costa Rican music in favour of the new, pre-packaged commercial music produced in San José or the US.

This particular trend away from folkways and toward commercialism is apparent in other aesthetic forms. Oral narrative, once a thriving tradition among Afro-Costa Ricans, has all but disappeared from the front porches and lodges of Limón. Now storytellers are published authors; their tales conveniently wrapped up and commodified in the inevitable process of modernity (see Chapter Seven). In the same way, calypso music rarely filters into the everyday activity of Limonenses. The only available venues are the occasional compact disc recording or the local *cantina*, both part of an economic system that requires material contribution. Now one must pay to participate in these cultural aesthetic forms.

For those who still seek out the Friday night calypso concerts put on by the two or three different bands that perform throughout the city, there are at least three important aspects to the performance that bear analysis. As a musical form which traces its roots to the very beginnings of the Limón community, and which now faces its own anachronism, Limón calypso music is inevitably nostalgic in both its subject matter and its very

performance. As such, and also by the nature of its focus on song lyrics, calypso music is very much a conceptual medium, where meaning is literally spelled out for the audience. Modern calypso performance is also a very rigid exercise, with a set repertoire of songs and little room for improvisation. All of these aspects of Limón calypso music are important both for its traditional role as the root of Afro-Costa Rican musical development and its contemporary role in Limonense experience.

Calypso and Cultural Nostalgia

The calypso form in Limón is distinct from those of other Caribbean regions. Unlike the calypsos of Trinidad which more appropriately relate to the Limón comparsas discussed below, the Limón calypso is a small band of musicians, with at least a drum kit, bass, and guitar, who sing subdued melodies for small, captive audiences. The calypso style is less political and more overtly nostalgic, offering up images of the simple life back on the islands or in the early days of Limón.

The main thrust of their nostalgic character is inherent in their performance, in the presentation of the band. Whether concerts are advertised on handmade signs throughout the city, or the consistency of their appearance at certain venues is simply common knowledge, the performances themselves are low-key events. This is in stark contrast to the not infrequent concert appearances by nationally famous rap and reggae bands that are promoted tirelessly by record companies and anxiously anticipated by the youth of Limón. Some of the most successful of these bands come out of Limón, though much of their success is predicated on their migration to San José. As such, the calypso band is more integrated into the everyday milieu of the city, but for that reason, it is relegated to

the mundane and ordinary. As a result, its audience consists of those whose music tastes run together with their memories of a more traditionally Afro-Caribbean Limón.

The implications of the calypso band's presentation continue into the actual performance. The band arranges itself into one corner of the bar, with maybe some tables removed to make way for dancing. Band members will sometimes co-ordinate their outfits with striped shirts or straw hats that reflect images of their parents and grandparents strumming on the front porch. Even the instrumentation is overtly nostalgic, with a washtub bass and only rudimentary amplification. The overall presentation of the band is one linked to the past and its associations with an idealised simplicity.

Reynaldo Kenton, the middle-aged leader of the band, New Dimension, has been playing in a calypso band since he was 25. He began playing music as a youth in a Limón arts school that has since closed down. It was there that he learned to play the guitar, but it was at home, surrounded by his father and his father's friends, that he learned the calypso songs. Though he has always considered himself a musician by trade, he has taken a number of different jobs to support his family. At times he has stopped playing altogether when times were hard, but he vows he will never quit. At one time he played full-time in San José for five years, and even managed to travel to Miami for a music festival and record an album for release in France.

Reynaldo claims that calypso music is the traditional music of Limón. He says it originated in Jamaica, and came to Limón through the older generations. He talked about how many things have changed, and how the youth have their own forms of music now. Reynaldo complained that the youth have no interest in keeping up the old traditions.

This is a common refrain anywhere modernity threatens perceived traditions, but even calypso is susceptible to change. Many of Reynaldo's songs are either written entirely in Spanish, or they are sung in both Spanish and English. He has even begun to incorporate aspects of Costa Rican history into his compositions. These changes have not only added to the band's success outside of Limón, they have also allowed the static nostalgia associated with calypso music and performance to evolve with the Limonense community.

The Conceptual Nature of Calypso Music

If the overall presentation of the calypso bands elicits a link to the past, the actual subject matter of the songs offers a direct verbal link to these same images. Whether the songs conjure up images of life on the islands, life on the banana plantations, or life in the social and political context of Costa Rica, they all present a way of knowing the surrounding world in a musical format that places greatest emphasis on the actual verbalisations of these images. In this sense, the Limón calypso is inherently discursive in its expression, relying on words to communicate its particular aesthetic.

In as much as Spanish lyrics herald an aesthetic evolution in calypso music, it also illustrates the overt emphasis on the message of the songs. Reynaldo Kenton says he wants people who do not speak English to be able to understand the lyrics, because 'the message of the songs is more important than the music'. According to Reynaldo, that message is 'simply the ways of life of ordinary people'.

While most of the calypso songs deal with the travails of love and other common human experiences, they also delve into the more extraordinary. One of the songs

Reynaldo is most proud of is his ballad of Juan Santamaria. The song recounts the story of one of Costa Rica's few military heroes, a young drummer boy in the army sent to fight the North American pirate William Walker. In the midst of a military stalemate, the young drummer boy rushed Walker's stronghold with a single torch, losing his life but flushing out the enemy. What makes the story most compelling is the common belief that Santamaria was at least partially of African descent. The ambiguity of Santamaria's racial origin illustrates well the historic ambiguity of African Americans in Costa Rica. The national response to this aspect of the story is reflected in two statues. The one in Alajuela, a highland province and the birth place of Santamaria, is quite noticeably of mixed ancestry, while the other, in San José, is plainly meant to appear Anglo-American.

Reynaldo's ballad, which celebrates the hero, has earned widespread acclaim in Costa Rica, including requests to play it at the annual celebration in Alajuela. The decision to sing about this figure in Costa Rican history illustrates the emphasis on discursive meaning in calypso music. Rather than rely on the phenomenological experience of the calypso sound to communicate a particular aesthetic, the calypso builds meaning through words to communicate a particular message. As such, the aesthetics of calypso music is overtly conceptual.

But even in its conceptual nature, the calypso can not completely escape the power of experience to draw transcendent meaning out of the performance. As Merleau-Ponty points out, 'as far as language is concerned, it is the lateral relation of one sign to another which makes each of them significant, so that meaning appears only at the intersection of and as it were in the interval between words' (Merleau-Ponty 1993:79). Just as each lyric is contextualised by its accompanying stanza and refrain, the entire calypso performance is contextualised by its accompanying instrumentation and setting.

Meaning is still inevitably drawn from the experience of the words in their setting: 'To understand it, we do not have to consult some inner lexicon which gives us the pure thoughts covered up by the words or forms we are perceiving; we have only to lend ourselves to its life, to its movement of differentiation and articulation, and to its eloquent gestures' (Merleau-Ponty 1993:79). The calypso is never allowed to express one particular message, however much its performers would like it to, for it is always contexualised in the ongoing process of phenomenological experience.

Performance and Rigidity

Unlike the school bands and comparsas described below, the calypso band does not have to actually perform their music for one to experience at least part of their particular aesthetic. One may simply read the lyrics or sheet music of the songs, or perhaps listen to the rare recording. However, the fact remains that for most the only opportunity to experience the calypso music is to attend a performance. The emphasis on the message of the songs may explain why calypso performance is relatively rigid and stationary.

The performative style of the calypsos is more than simply an effort to keep the focus on the lyrics. The rigidity associated with calypso performance demonstrates the intimate link between performance and the embodiment of experience. For the calypsos, the emphasis is on a nostalgic image of the Limonense cultural context that relies on the permanence of linguistic concepts. But there is a non-discursive element in their presentation that makes an experiential connection between frozen concepts and frozen bodies. Standing, or even sitting, in the corner of a small enclosed space, the calypso

performance anchors lyrical references to a static and immovable past in the experience of a similar embodiment.

It is this aspect of calypso performance, as in Limón canvas art, that diffuses its overt appeal to meaningful concepts, blending that appeal with the phenomenology of aesthetic experience which is inherently unpredictable. As canvas artists bring a thing to be experienced into the world which has its own cultural implications apart from whatever message is intended by the artist, the calypso bands anchor their message in an embodied performance which will be experienced on its own terms. The implication is not for a measurable imbalance between the impact of either aspect of experience, but for the continuous negotiation between discursive and non-discursive meaning, between the ideology of discrete concepts and the phenomenology of aesthetic experience.

The School Band

The school bands in Limón carry the concept of embodiment a step further. As described in the introduction, the forward movement of their procession down the city streets and the ongoing internal choreography place the school bands in stark contrast to the calypso bands. In the midst of the contrast is the negotiation of meaning in the process of identity formation, a process that filters through the whole of Limonense experience.

From July to November each year, Limón seems to enter a kind of informal marching season where almost every week there is a different excuse to parade school children down the city streets. The streets are closed off and spectators line the sidewalks to watch as nieces, nephews, sons and daughters march in procession to the beat of

drums, the crash of cymbals, and the occasional chime of miniature xylophones (see Figure 6.1).

Two aspects of the Limón school bands are important for understanding the Limón aesthetic of performance which will be developed further in the analysis of Limón comparsas. First, their connection to the wider national context highlights those areas of difference that continue to set Limón apart. Second, the actual performances of school bands socialise the body in ways that are important not only for future participation in comparsas but also for the development of a phenomenological understanding of Limonense experience in regard to gender roles and ethnic identity.

The Parade of Difference

The Limón school band is part of a national tradition. The school parade is a permanent fixture throughout Costa Rica, and as such illustrates Limón's connection to the wider national context. But while the parades are intended as formal, patriotic affairs, the school bands of Limón also embody the contrast between the region and the rest of the country. Emphasising aspects of Limón's connection to blackness usually framed as racial stereotypes by outsiders, the school bands appropriate those stereotypes as tools of aesthetic expression.

One of the most obvious examples of this is the rhythm of the march in Limón school bands. The Limón bands have more of a Caribbean flavour than the military cadence in other parts of Costa Rica. This can be as overt as instrumental renditions of Harry Belefonte tunes or as subtle as more complex percussion orchestrations that mimic the sound of comparsas (see below). As school bands occasionally travel around the

country playing in different parades, the Limón school band performance has become famous for its distinct style.

Since the school bands are intended as a socialising institution for children in Costa Rica, many outsiders felt the different style in Limón was one more example of Limonense resistance to Costa Rican citizenship and national pride. At one point, the Ministry of Culture demanded that Limón bands perform the same songs in the same style as bands in the Central Valley. Many in Limón argued that each province should be able to celebrate their patriotism in their own way. The Ministry agreed and the Limón school bands were allowed creative freedom.

This freedom is still controlled by the band directors at each school. One director at a high school in Puerto Limón claims the Caribbean sound comes from the students, and left to their own designs, 'they would turn the 15th of September into another Carnaval'. This statement is compelling especially since the mid-September parade celebrates Costa Rica's independence from Spain. The stylistic non-conformity of the Limón school band celebrates at least an aesthetic independence from Costa Rica even as it commemorates the nation's own political independence.

This parade of difference embodied in the Limón school bands will be discussed further in a similar embodiment among comparsas, but it is important to point out here that the collective defence of a distinct Limonense style does not necessarily compete with Costa Rican nationalism among Limonenses. Even the most vociferous critics of the so-called racial democracy of Costa Rica will often openly express their loyalty to the nation. There is often a clear distinction between cultural and political solidarity, and many see their struggle to maintain distinctively Limonense cultural forms as part of a process of reconciliation with the wider national context. The goal is for that

reconciliation, or political integration, to be achieved without losing the sense of a cultural identity for Limonenses.

The Socialisation of the Body

As a youth activity, the school bands inevitably participate in the process of socialisation. The more obvious aspects of this socialisation that deal with patriotism, citizenship and co-operation tend to obscure the more subtle socialisation which takes place in the non-discursive realm of embodiment and experience. From the hierarchical structure of the bands to the stop and start forward procession of the parade, the school band performance orients its members to certain ineffable attitudes that may best be described as the socialisation of the body.

Each school band is divided into several sections. The first few sections consist of flag bearers dressed in the usual blue and white school uniforms and various troops of male and female marchers. The next section is usually a female group of musicians, almost always playing the xylophone. Behind the female musicians is the largest group, the drum section, which is almost always male. Next come an all female section of cymbal players and an all female group of ribbon dancers. Each school follows this basic pattern, though some may add a section of recorders or ribbon dancers are replaced with baton twirlers. The whole band moves in a forward progression, driven on by the rhythm of the drum section, stopping at intervals chosen by the band directors to allow the xylophones to hammer out a particular tune.

One of the most immediately noticeable aspects of the whole performance is the gender division of each section. Though the first section of marchers is often of mixed

gender, the rest of the band sections are assigned gender associations that almost never vary. Boys play the drums that make the whole band move, while girls fall into the assigned dances and instrumental accompaniments to their rhythm. The most jarring aspect of the whole display is the explicitness of the girls' choreography. The aesthetic effect is female dancers on display as sexual objects in miniature, subordinate to the beat of the male drums.

A thorough deconstruction of this pattern in the school band performance would no doubt only confirm the power of performance in the socialisation of the body of both male and female band members. But to stress the symbolic character of the performance would miss the phenomenological mark of the band member's bodily experience. More than a mere text upon which meaning is inscribed or from which meaning may be read or deconstructed, the body is an embodiment of being-in-the-world experience. More than a text, the body has a textuality (see Csordas 1994) which is greater than the sum of its symbolic parts. The two together, text and textuality, body and embodiment, produce the ongoing dialectic between discursive meaning and non-discursive experience which in turn produces all of the attitudes and affinities of a particular cultural orientation. In this case, the actual sensate experience of gender distinction in school band performance orients attitudes and perceptions in ways that verbal assertions of gender roles within the social context could never achieve in isolation. To be sure, this same gender hierarchy is reinforced in other more cognitive ways throughout the socialisation of young people in Limón, but it is the under-girding socialisation of the body that anchors conceptual appeals to social norms in actual experience.

It may be of some use here to restate an important aspect, and potential danger, of this kind of analysis. To speak of the socialisation of the body implies a reversal of

Descartes' original mind/body split. Not in the phenomenological intention to rejoin these two aspects of human experience and meaning, but in the opposite extreme of favouring bodily experience over cognitive meaning. The result is a new dichotomy focused on the legitimacy of the ineffable and illegitimacy of anything which might be put into words. Of course, even the linguistic formulation of this false dichotomy belies its shaky logic, but it is important to distinguish the present analysis from this fallacy. The intention is to examine those areas where non-discursive experience informs and participates in discursive meaning to produce a particular quality of perception that cannot be defined solely by either. As Csordas argues, the body should not replace theory about texts, but be placed 'in a paradigmatic position complementary to the text' (Csordas 1994:12). In many ways that is the intention of this thesis, to examine the ineffable, not in so much as it is somehow a more valid way of knowing the Limonense world, but in that it is integral to any grasp of the particular cultural context of Limón and Limonenses.

The Comparsa

The link between comparsas and school bands is such that it is difficult to speak of one without invoking aspects of the other. They share a symbiotic relationship, each informing the experience and performance of the other. Comparsas began as part of the annual October celebration of Carnaval, but the groundwork for their development was laid by the school bands. Today, they exist as two distinct expressive forms, though their connection continues to influence their respective performances.

Still, one must look to Carnaval to understand the development of the comparsa as

a Limonense expressive form. As Carnaval grew each year, locals included more activities in the celebration. During the 1950s, Limonenses added a parade of street bands as the culmination of the week-long event. Judging by the structural similarities between the comparsas and the school bands, it is seems likely that the basic format for the street bands was borrowed from members' experience as school children. The comparsas also borrowed from the calypso tradition of other Carnaval celebrations, but included its own unique Limón style. Rather than the typical steel drums, the comparsas played skin drums, many of which were borrowed directly from African traditions. The music itself was entirely percussion with singing restricted to rhymed chants in Spanish that usually extolled the qualities of the comparsa. Costumes became an important part of the comparsa performance, with some groups changing each year, and others relying on consistency to communicate their particular aesthetic. On parade day, the comparsas would process through the streets to the cheers of onlookers who would often join in the procession.

Today, comparsas comprise over ten different groups each consisting of a hundred or more singers, dancers and musicians performing every year on the last day of Limón Carnaval, as well as year-round in parades all over Costa Rica (see Figure 6.2). Each comparsa is roughly divided between dancers and musicians, with further divisions depending on age and ability. Like the school bands, the comparsas consist of dancers in the first few sections and the percussionists bringing up the rear. The crucial difference is in the greater performative flexibility and expressive freedom.

The Limón comparsa distinguishes itself in a variety of important ways: its expressive root in experience; its inclusive ethnic composition; its progressive vision; and its performative flexibility. All of these characteristics of the comparsa establish it as one

of the most important aesthetic models for the development of a cohesive cultural identity in Limón.

The Expression of Experience

The Limón comparsa owes much of its success to its ability to adapt to the cultural needs of Limonenses. Rather than present rigid concepts that appeal to an ideological construction of identity, Limón comparsas anchor their expression in the experiential nature of their performance. On parade day in Limón Carnaval, onlookers meander through the comparsa performances, sometimes joining in the dance, and always filling the street in the wake of the last comparsa to join in the procession (see Figure 6.3). Both band members and audience participate in the performance that literally draws one into the expressive act where meaning is constantly negotiated.

This aspect of Limón comparsa performance developed in response to the rigidly ideological nature of Carnaval. Carnaval, like Limón canvas art or calypso music, materialises concepts and rhetoric associated with the ideology of blackness, and as such, provides a forum in which Limonenses can respond to its claims. That response is part of the ongoing, phenomenological process of identity formation that allows even the most rarefied ideological concepts to become one more layer of experience in the lifeworld of Limonenses. In the case of Carnaval, this process produced a creeping dissatisfaction with the event as a true embodiment of Limonense identity. As Quince Duncan explained, the people of Limón are turning away from an essentialist concept of blackness, and toward a more inclusive notion of blackness that is tied to the Caribbean. One result of this trend is a general emotional abdication from the first several days of

Carnaval so that all energy may be put into the final day, Saturday, and the parade of comparsas.

Many Limonenses decry the deterioration of Carnaval and point to Saturday and the *desfile*, or parade, of comparsas as a kind of redemption for the entire event. Many see the preceding days of Carnaval as a reason to party, but Saturday is the *real* day of Carnaval. One woman, commiserating on the disorganisation of cultural events, proclaimed, 'Saturday is the day. You can be sure that will start on time'. For Alfred King, the parade is the heart of Carnaval today: 'Carnaval *is* the procession'.

The collective emphasis on the Saturday procession of comparsas indicates an experiential affinity with the aesthetics of the comparsa performance that is missing in the overall experience of Carnaval. Shirley Campbell, an Afro-Costa Rican poet, describes it this way: 'It is Saturday / of infinite music / that plays with the sea / involving it in the secret flavour / of its adventure / It is a Saturday / too big / for life / too eternal / to forget / and ours' (Campbell 1988:29). Unlike Carnaval, the comparsa grew out of lived experience as an organic expression of Limonense identity. This organic expression builds on the Afro-Caribbean influence that inspired the ideology of black identity and is undeniably foundational to the cultural milieu of Limón, but also expresses the amalgam of other ethnic influences, along with the innovation and spontaneity integral to Limonense lived experience.

Limonenses' experiential affinity with comparsas is rooted in two particular aspects of its development. First, it is intimately integrated into everyday Limón life. Though it began as an isolated performance once a year, it never developed any requirement for individual specialisation, that is to say, it never became a circumscribed institution requiring individuals dedicated solely to its maintenance. Comparsa members

are also dock workers, taxi drivers, hairdressers and office workers. Like the canvas artists, comparsa performers are common folk with family, neighbours and friends. Even the twin General Directors of the largest and most famous comparsa, the Brasileros, share a taxi business when they are not performing.

Part of the comparsas' rootedness in the everyday life of Limón is its extension beyond the annual celebration of Carnaval. Perhaps because it is a performance made up of common folk, the comparsas have been established as a year-round activity, with Carnaval at the epicentre of a much more wide-spread aesthetic expression. In this context, practice sessions take on the qualities of performances. Throughout the year, the comparsas practice in various barrios within the city. The practice sessions block off an entire street and can be heard from anywhere in the barrio (see Figure 6.4). Walking through the city after dark one can hear the driving beat of a nearby comparsa blend into the distant echoes of other bands practising well into the night. The rhythms seep through the walls of the neighbourhood homes, establishing a deep connection between a particular comparsa and its barrio. Along with practice sessions, one may happen upon the Brasileros rhythm section playing in the stands of the local football stadium or one of the other comparsas participating in one of the many annual holiday celebrations.

The second aspect of comparsa development that has established its experiential affinity among Limonenses is its role as a socialising institution. Living in Barrio Roosevelt, I became involved with the Brasileros comparsa lead by a pair of charismatic twins named Danny and Dennis Sterling. My involvement illustrates as well as any other evidence the efficacy of the comparsa to socialise individuals into the community. Motivated by the sound of their practice sessions filling the barrio, I soon found myself

linked to a network of Limonenses that extended beyond the borders of barrio Roosevelt and included those who did not actually participate in the performances.

The socialising aspect of the comparsas is perhaps best seen in its influence on the youth of Limón. Children in barrio Roosevelt are initiated into the sights and sounds of the Brasileros early. Danny Sterling encourages the participation of the children, and explains, '[the children] they start, you see, we make them play. . .we put out the instruments, the rock'n' sticks, the Bass drum sticks, put the congas . . we have the go-go bells (the Latin bells), and we make them play, because they're going to be the future'. Though they must wait to actually play the instruments during a performance, the children do participate as dancers as young as 7 or 8 years old.

Of course children also perform in the school bands that so closely resemble the comparsas in structure and performance. One local school band director explained his role was basically to control the children, keeping them from 'dancing the way they do in the comparsas'. In many ways the school bands are the proving grounds for comparsa performance, and the school band director confirmed that many of the children go on to participate in the comparsas.

From the late night practice sessions to the socialisation of children into comparsa performance, the comparsas represent an important part of everyday aesthetic experience in Limón. They serve as a social connectors, focal points for social networks where all the attributes of Limonense identity come together in music, dance, dress, socialised space, and that ineffable cultural aesthetic that defines it all. Avoiding overt associations with discursive concepts, the comparsas anchor their expression in performance and the embodiment of experience. The result is an inclusive expressive form, not only in terms of cultural and ethnic intersections, but also in its blurring of the line between performers

and spectators.

Comparsas and Ethnic Inclusion

The Brasileros use a repertoire of more than twenty songs; they play all of them on percussion instruments. Each year they may change some of the words, play with the rhythms or write new songs, but invariably the music consists of complex poly-rhythmic orchestrations using several different percussion instruments. As Danny Sterling explains, 'We com'n from our roots . . . from Africa, and they's percussion, they never have no electronic'.

Danny's reference to his African roots illustrates the overt process of cultural appropriation in the comparsa style without the denying the multi-ethnic character of comparsa performance. The stereotypical association between blacks and rhythm has long colluded in the suppression of Afro-American social legitimacy. Such essentialist models of a socially constructed racial category somehow stuck in the 'jungle stage' of evolutionary development is exactly the kind of ideological oppression that musical forms like the Limón comparsas so effectively fight against. Using the highly developed, poly-rhythmic style of African percussion music, Limón comparsas have appropriated the source of racist stereotypes about blacks and rhythm, and inserted it into a multi-ethnic context.

None of the comparsas, including the Brasileros, represent any one particular ethnic group, and none of the comparsas seek to express solely the Afro-Costa Rican culture in their performance. The Indios, the oldest comparsa in Limón, illustrates this point. The Indios celebrate the indigenous population of the Caribbean Coast of Costa

Rica with the same red costumes they have worn since the 1950s. Their dance style consists of a monotonous jumping meant to mimic the ritual dances of the indigenous groups. Theirs is not a reference to the Afro-Caribbean past, or even to their own indigenous past (indeed, few of the members could claim indigenous ancestry). They are referencing the present reality of the indigenous population that remains a part of the region's ethnic mix.

The Brasileros, the Indios, and other comparsas are not striving to 'rescue' a past tradition based solely on the contributions of one ethnic group. Comparsas are a relatively new aesthetic creation, seeking a connection to ethnic realties of their present experience. They represent an important place for different ethnic groups to come together for a common purpose, share ideas, and learn from each other how to most vividly express a common cultural identity.

The wider social context of Limón shares this emphasis on the complexities of an ethnically mixed present. While this does not imply a de-emphasis on the past and its sentimental simplicity, it does reflect an emergent dissatisfaction with the disparity between that past and Limón's present. Many Limonenses seek a model for a unifying cultural identity that does not forget the past, but actively incorporates the constantly shifting ethnic influences of the Limonense cultural landscape.

One local Afro-Costa Rican minister discusses this process in reference to the UNIA: 'They come together every week, these are all elderly people, and they sit down and talk about the hey day of the Black Star Line and how involved they were. They have no proposal for today'. The minister concludes that the older generation 'is unable to come up with a significant proposal because they are living in an era that is not theirs.' His frustration with the older generation 'living in the past' does not preclude his own

self identification as 'black, period', but it does allow that root identity to include a blending of ethnic influences that includes his Miskito Indian grandmother and the Spanish-language education he received in Nicaragua. It is this blending that epitomises Limón's present cultural reality.

As referenced in Chapter Three, Quince Duncan sees the emphasis on this blending as the panacea to Limón's identity crisis. For Duncan, the emphasis on the past and its clear ethnic divisions may glorify particular ethnic contributions made by blacks, but often at the expense of a unified Limonense identity. Duncan explains: 'If you want the province to defend their rights and become independent, your emphasis should be less on difference and try to build something common'. His position does not discount the Afro-Caribbean cultural foundations of Limón as illustrated in the canvas art of local painters, but he does see the need to incorporate other influences. The goal for Duncan is a unified identity built from Afro-Caribbean foundations but incorporating the blending of influences that makes Limón as much Caribbean as it is Latin American.

This alludes to what has been discussed previously concerning two distinct but related notions of blackness. There is the essentialist racial concept of blackness that, as a political ideology, serves as a powerful rhetorical tool. This concept, based on a reified category of racial difference, orients socio-political action in the ongoing but often unspoken antagonism between Afro-Costa Ricans in Limón and the rest of Costa Rica. There is also a more flexible notion of blackness as a category of experience that subsumes ideal types into an amalgam of different strategies for identification without sacrificing the authority of black cultural foundations. Within the wider bounds of this concept, the same ideologues that dub Limón the 'black city' in the 'black province' contribute to the power of blackness to respond to the various experiential connections all

Limonenses make to Limón. As with any process of identity formation, discursive attempts to reify identity are continually subject to evaluative experience which can discard or reinvent the concepts introduced.

The comparsas, as part of the Limonense aesthetic system, participate in this process by materialising ideology and experience in one performance. As embodiments of the Limonense blending of influences, comparsas respond to the struggle of Limonenses to move from idyllic images of the past to more progressive, inclusive images of the present and future. As Danny Sterling explained, the comparsas grow from Afro-Caribbean roots. All depend on Afro-Caribbean instruments and rhythms for their performance. Building from this Afro-Caribbean base, which sets the tone for the forward progression of the comparsa, other influences contribute to the aesthetic experience of the performance. These influences include Latino dance steps in the choreography, Indigenous and Latino themes in the costumes, and the use of Spanish in the chanted songs. This basic structure to all comparsas makes them more than interesting aesthetic metaphors for the Limón cultural context. The comparsas are a dynamic and formative part of that context that forges new collective meaning in the process of its performance.

Performance and Procession

Group processions are a frequent means for both political and religious expression within Costa Rica and therefore Limón. The fact that comparsas move in a steady forward progression illustrates their connection to the wider historical and cultural context of the region. That is not to say that comparsa performers bring to mind all the possible

conceptual connections to other processual forms as they move down the city streets, but it does prompt an examination of other processions and how they might be related to comparsa performance.

Religious processions take place on feast days throughout the liturgical calendar, with the largest procession saved for the pilgrimage to Cartago on the feast day of the Virgin of Los Angeles, the patron saint of Costa Rica. The annual pilgrimage to the Basilica in Cartago was established in honour of an apparition of the Virgin Mary in the 17th century to a peasant girl in Cartago. Particularly interesting in light of the ethno-history of Limón is that like the heroic Juan Santamaria, the peasant girl is known as the *mulata*, or a girl of mixed African and European descent. The story is that the girl found a small carved figure in the shape of the Virgin Mary in the forest. When she took it home with her it miraculously disappeared, only to re-appear in the forest where she found it. After several attempts to remove the figure, the church decided it was a divine apparition and dedicated a basilica to its honour. Today, thousands of pilgrims walk the road to Cartago from all over Costa Rica to pay homage the carved figure of their patron saint, known affectionately as *Negrita*, the diminutive term for a black woman.

The irony of thousands of white Costa Ricans making a pilgrimage to worship *La Negrita* which appeared to the half-black peasant girl is not lost on many Afro-Costa Ricans. In a poem to the Virgin, Eulalia Bernard expresses the irony well: 'You, you have liberated us peasants / from the strange responsibility of granting luck / You, you grant it now to those that / through pinches, snatched it away from / their black siblings' (Bernard 1982:70). The poem plays on the Costa Rican superstition that pinching a black person will bring good luck, a superstition no doubt based as much on the rare sight of Afro-Americans in the early days of the Central Valley as on the wider socio-political

practice of drawing benefit from their pain. The poem also implies frustration that the ultimate snatching away of luck from Afro-Costa Ricans is embodied in the appropriation by white Costa Ricans of a black patron saint which appeared to a peasant girl of mixed descent.

The annual pilgrimage to Cartago is the paradigm for the smaller religious processions that take place throughout the year. Some of the more elaborate are the passion plays of Easter that take place throughout Costa Rica, including Puerto Limón. The processions represent the stations of the Cross. Some are highly stylised affairs with elaborate pallets filled with iconic imagery, while others strive for greater realism with human actors playing the roles of Christ, angels, and even troops of Roman guards. In Puerto Limón, the passion play procession is of the more subdued variety, but there as elsewhere the focus is on both devotion and penance. These themes are most evident in the *Romería*, or main pilgrimage to Cartago, but in all the processions there is an element of suffering intended to both atone for sin and display religious devotion. Not surprisingly, the passion play procession in Cartago is one of the most elaborate, where hundreds of men take the roles of Roman guards divided into a hierarchy of troops and officers correlated to the number of years they have participated. The privilege is taken very seriously as a display of piety and religious commitment. Likewise, in the Romería, religious commitment and devotion is directly proportional to the distance walked, and the choice to finish the last stretch through the Basilica on one's knees.

The association between organised processions and religious devotion is well established and filters into other experience. In Limón, part of that experience is the political struggle of its labour organisation. Since Keith first imported foreign workers to work the Atlantic railroad, labour disputes have been an issue. From the hunger march of

Italians to the labour strikes of Afro-Caribbeans throughout this century, Limón has witnessed more conflict in the workforce than any other region in Costa Rica. It is interesting to note that the same fervour associated with religious devotion in the various processions and pilgrimages is also associated with the commitment to labour organisation in the various work stoppages and protest marches.

From the pilgrimages to Cartago to the passion plays of Easter to the political demonstrations down the streets of Limón, processions represent both devotion and progress, whether that devotion be religious or political and that progress be spiritual or social. The comparsa, as another manifestation of the procession, embodies these same aspects in its performance. As a performance of the developing multi-ethnic Limonense identity and a thoroughly exhausting experience in the perpetually oppressive climate of Limón, the comparsa procession represents a legitimisation of devotion and commitment comparable to the religious and political processions.

But like the gender distinction manifest in school band performance, these aspects of comparsa performance in procession are more than mere symbolic representations which may imply some conscious linguistic correlation in the minds of performers. At work here is the phenomenological embodiment of devotion and progress experienced by Limonenses as they process through the streets of the city. Drawing on the experience of pilgrimages and protests, the comparsa performers are enacting a similar embodiment to express a particular cultural aesthetic. Even if individual performers have never participated in a Romería or a labour dispute, these processual forms of experience and expression are integrated into a collective embodiment situated in a specific socio-political and religious history of experience within the city and the nation. The procession is a being-in-the-world experience that all Limonenses can relate to on some

level. No doubt some could offer a complex symbolic justification for the association between processions, forward progression, progress, and empowerment, but more often it is an act situated in experience rather than a linguistic concept situated in a discursive lexicon.

This is the crux of the phenomenological perspective, where action is as much a being-in-the-world phenomenon of experience as it is a product of linguistic formulations of possible choices and eventual commitment to some manifestation of that intellectual decision. Action is not always reducible to a conceptual formula, just as much of everyday physical activity requires little intellectual contemplation in order to execute. Writing about the embodiment of devotion and progress in comparsa performance is in many ways a linguistic contrivance in an effort to reveal what is experientially non-linguistic (or pre-linguistic) for comparsa performers. This contrivance can only hope to evoke the quality of experience in embodiment, but in the evocation it may offer some idea as to how comparsa performance as an aesthetic practice is participating in the formation of a collective identity in Limón.

Performance and Flexibility

The emphasis on blending and lack of emphasis on the past in the comparsa leads to a flexibility in performance and a susceptibility to change that is supported by its informality. Though the comparsas use professional percussion instruments, the musicians themselves grew up learning to play on whatever was at hand. As Danny Sterling demonstrates in the epigraph at the beginning of this chapter, percussion music lends itself to musicians who 'feel the rhythm' and desire instant gratification.

Percussion instruments present themselves in any hard surface and are unique in their relatively short learning curve. Though complexity of rhythm requires practice, musicians can easily produce sounds at any skill level. This makes for great variety in playing styles – no set training schedule or 'right way' to play constricting the expressive impulse of the musicians.

The result is a lack of precision in the comparsa performance. While the members of the comparsas rely on a certain amount of choreography and a predetermined set of songs, they retain considerable room for individuality. In contrast to the control over elements that Limonense canvas artists practice, the Limonense who participate in the comparsas experiment more within their expressive form.

While the bass players must maintain a measure of regularity to keep the whole group moving, the other percussionists can more easily experiment. Timba players take the most latitude. The timba - two drums of varying pitch with a cymbal and wood block - is one of the most prestigious of the instruments due to the considerable innovation allowed by the four different percussion sounds available. Indeed, like the others, the timba players often must fall into a particular pattern, but in most songs there is a crescendo of sounds that allows complete freedom of combination and beat.

Dancing, another major component of comparsa performance, fits this same model of spontaneity and individual innovation. Carlos, one of the choreographers for the Brasileros, decides which dance steps to perform during the procession, but the order in which he places the various step combinations only tangentially relates to the particular song or beat combination. In addition, the dancers in Carlos' group all perform the steps at varying levels, with a couple occasionally breaking off to perform a spontaneous duet. Danzer, another dancer in the Brasileros, is almost completely free to

perform extemporaneously, running and twisting through the procession and occasionally falling into the steps of the others.

The emphasis on performative flexibility is a crucial part of embodiment and experience for Limonenses. It is precisely the flexible, unpredictable nature of comparsa performance that makes it so appropriate in the process of Limonense identity formation. Rather than rely on abstract concepts to which the great amorphous nature of culture is meant to conform, the comparsa offers all of the impermanence and spontaneity of actual experience upon which to base a more appropriately malleable identity. Rather than seek for some bedrock of meaning for Limonense identity, which will inevitably shift in the course of cultural development, the comparsas offer as a locus of identity the embodiment of experience as a being-in-the-world phenomenological response to the cultural and material environment.

The Parade of Difference Revisited

Like many aspects of the relationship between school bands and comparsas, the embodiment of difference discussed in the context of Limón school bands is carried further in comparsa performance. Limón comparsas are (in)famous throughout Costa Rica for their raucous performance style. Some towns have organised their own comparsa bands that occasionally make the journey to Limón to participate in Carnaval. For the most part, the comparsa is still considered a decidedly Limonense expressive form inevitably treated with the same mixture of distance and curiosity that characterises white Costa Rica's attitude toward Limón in general. This is most clearly played out among crowds of white Costa Rican spectators whenever a Limón comparsa is invited to

perform outside the province. In this context, the association between Limón and blackness as a social pollutant discussed in Chapter Four is combined with a collective fascination with the exotic cultural practices of the people on the other side of the volcanoes.

On one such occasion, I accompanied the Brasileros comparsa to a performance in Cartago. One the oldest cities in Costa Rica, and the former capital, Cartago remains one of the most conservative communities in the country. The Brasileros were invited to perform with other bands in a procession to inaugurate a new university in the city.

We arrived as the other bands started their processions through the city streets. As it was still some time before Carnaval, and not all of the performers had the new Brazilian style calypso costumes, some were forced to wear last year's African-theme costumes. As the band spilled out of the bus and hurriedly got into position, the large, garishly coloured, mix-matched pastiche of Caribbean and African inspired costumes draped on black and white bodies already clashed with the austere, navy blue military band performing before them. As they picked up their beat and began to move, their poly-rhythmic sound and controlled frenzy of movement could not have clashed more with the staid military cadence of the other group (see Figure 6.5).

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. The Brasileros seemed only to flaunt this impression, forcing the highland spectators to reckon with their presence. On the other hand, the crowds who stood idly by as the other bands passed would cheer with every break in the Brasileros' music. 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.

As the bus pulled out of Cartago at the end of a long day, I notice the heads of pedestrians turn and look at the bus full of Limonenses all along the narrow streets. Faces would turn, and elbows would nudge neighbours. At one point we stopped in traffic beside an open air market and all commerce halted to point and laugh at the bus from Limón. We were like some travelling circus, full of all the wonder and exoticism as well as the bizarre and unfamiliar. I had the distinct impression of a collective sigh in the city as we left. Now they could return to imagining the 'dark province' as a place far away and awesomely, sometimes fearfully, different.

The Gendering of Performance

The interdependence of the performers does not exclude certain hierarchical divisions among them, particularly concerning gender. Though women have some authority over choreography, the percussion section is limited to the men. Even among the dancers, women often perform separate dance steps of a more sexually suggestive nature than those executed by the men. The implication is that men set the rhythm and guide the forward progression while women must adapt their performance to the beat, on display as objects of desire. As they play into the desires of the men who run the comparsas, they are also forcing men to view them as more than mothers and wives, but as women with the power to bestow or withhold their sexuality.

As a locus of embodied experience, it is important to examine how the comparsa

performance informs the social construction of gender, especially in respect to what was touched on in the school bands above. Specifically, analysis should turn to how femininity is constructed in comparsa performance and how that construction is played out both on women's bodies, in the Foucaultian sense of an inscribed text, and by women's embodiment, in the phenomenological sense of experience and agency.

Femininity and the Body as Text

Like the hierarchical segmentation of the school bands, the comparsas are divided into discrete groups with certain performative tasks. In general, the comparsas take the principles of school band performance several steps further. As such, the comparsas are divided into two main segments, the dancers and the musicians, which are further divided by age and skill.

Within these divisions are certain clearly marked gender patterns. The musicians, or more specifically, the percussionists, invariably exclude women, whereas the dancers include both men and women. In a sense, women may be interpreted as a sub-set of men where men participate in all aspects of comparsa performance and women are relegated strictly to dancing. This structural exclusion of women from certain aspects of comparsa performance is compounded by the dynamics of the performance itself. The comparsa, as a processual performance, is driven forward by the beat set by the musicians. The percussion section is the engine for the whole performance, dictating the pace and the rhythm of all comparsa movement. By excluding women from this domain, comparsas place women in a subordinate position, submissive to the pace set by the men and their drums. Martin Stokes comments on this dynamic in other contexts, observing how

musicians 'preside over these occasions [of social dance] in the very real sense of controlling the 'flow' of the socio-musical space' (Stokes 1994:22). In the Limonense context, musicians not only control the flow, they are also part of that flow as they move with the dancers down the street.

The social and psychological implications of this gender submission in comparsa performance is potentially diffused by the fact that men also perform as dancers. It could be argued that what is at work is not a gendered differentiation of power, but a more subtle distinction based on the cultural currency of those who set the rhythm and those who must dance. Evidence suggests that gender differentiation still plays an important role since men, even as dancers, are given much more freedom of expression than women. Within the Brasileros, the dancers Carlos and Danzer have little or no restraints placed on their movement, and in fact they are expected to move about the group and into the crowd of spectators. Best described as soloists, Carlos and Danzer demonstrate the power men continue to wield even as part of the sub-set of dancers in the comparsas.

The way in which women are expected to dance is another aspect of women's participation in the comparsas that lends further credence to the idea that there are important intersections of gender and power at work. Like the girls in the school bands, women comparsa dancers often engage in sexually explicit choreography during the performance. What makes the explicitness of the dance steps jarring is the stark contrast with male dancers. As women gyrate and contort their bodies, sometimes laid out in the middle of the street, the men simply dance in place as if intentionally toning down their choreography to highlight the sexual display of the women. Moreover, women often perform spontaneous, sexually explicit duets with one another, but never with a male dancer. This only adds to the emphasis on the sexual display of women for both the

spectators and the other men in the comparsas. Women must not only submit to the rhythm and pace set by men, but also must submit to the objectifying male gaze as they execute auto and homo-erotic moves in the highly public context of the city street (see Figure 6.6).

The semiotics of gender differentiation in comparsa performance reveals much of the particular intersections of gender, sexuality, and power prevalent throughout Limón society. Whether as spectators or participants, women receive specific images of femininity acted out through the body. In this sense, the body acts as a post-structuralist text upon which certain vectors of power and dominance are inscribed. By acting out these vectors of power and dominance, women are deepening the grooves of their collective bodily experience; translating that bodily experience to a concept of femininity that bleeds into all other aspects of social life.

Femininity and Embodiment as Textuality

The deconstruction of women's bodily performance in comparsas presented above obscures an alternate, potently subversive, aspect of women's participation in the comparsas. As Stokes points out: 'music . . . does more than underscore, or express differences already there. Music and more particularly dance provides an arena for pushing back boundaries, exploring the border zones that separate male from female' (Stokes 1994:22). To view the body as merely a text upon which power and dominance are inscribed provides only a partial view of human experience where the body is a socially constructed thing to be manipulated. Without denying the effects of power on the body as an inscribed text, an analysis of embodiment as a being-in-the-world

phenomenological perspective of human experience, closer to Barthes' (1986) concept of text versus work or Csordas' (1994) concept of textuality, adds the potential for agency in the somewhat dreary context of Foucaultian post-structuralism.

As embodied experience, the comparsa performance exists in its sensory immediacy, where women (and men) perform their dance steps not as conceptual abstractions of power and dominance but as physical acts in space and time with as much or as little 'meaning' as taking a step or reaching for a pen. Rather than reducing each physicality to its linguistic correlate in the realm of cultural meanings and conceptual constraints, women's performance can be evoked in its immediate experience, where tiny liminal moments can redress the influence of power as an objective, unavoidable, and non-negotiable inscription on the body; a material shackle on the subversive power of human agency.

Within the liminality of immediate experience, women can subvert the structure of comparsa performance by appropriating the very images of sexuality and submission imposed upon them. This concept of liminality diverges somewhat from Turner's (1967) use which describes those moments when social initiates are able to step out of cultural experience and reflect on the whole of cultural 'meaning'. Here liminality refers to an experiential moment, predicated on the idea that there is no escape from, no 'stepping out' of experience. There is, however, always a tenuous relationship, a continuous negotiation, between meaning and experience, between text and textuality, between the body and embodiment. To use Turner's concept for my own purposes, each moment of action is a moment of 'pure possibility, whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise' (Turner 1967:97). In those moments, women move from liminal moment to liminal moment, constantly accessing this negotiation which even if it does

not actually transform meaning serves to juxtapose a contrary experience of embodiment as a subversive critique.

The result of this process is an experiential empowerment within the semiotic structure of comparsa performance. In as much as the dances are choreographed in advance, there is still a considerable amount of room for improvisation during the performance. Indeed, as we have seen above, the flexibility of the performance is one of the crucial characteristics of the comparsa experience. Using this flexibility and improvisation, women are able to insert a certain amount of control over their display as sexual objects. Women decide when to split off from the set dances to perform a spontaneous duet or when and to what extent their pre-choreographed routines involve an overt display of their bodies as sexual objects. It is the insertion of intentionality that helps diffuse what is still an exertion of power by the male driven structure of the comparsa. By appropriating the essentialist image of femininity, women are able to deploy that image on their own time and at their own choosing thus assuming the role of gatekeeper of sexual desire. As Moore observes among the Endo: 'women take an enormous pride in their sexuality because they see it as something which they have and men desire but cannot take away from them' (Moore 1986:175). In the context of Limonense comparsas, the image of women as either asexual maternal figures or essentially sexual objects is at least partially controlled by women themselves. Here again we find a correlate in Turner's concept of liminality, where in that moment, women are 'either sexless or bisexual and may be regarded as a kind of human *prima materia*, an undifferentiated raw material' (Turner 1967:98). As such, each moment of action is pregnant with possibility as women experience not just the symbolic categorisation of gender (vis-à-vis Turner), but the empowering agency of embodiment in the actual

performance. By displaying their bodies during comparsa performance, they are forcing men to reckon with them as more than mothers and sisters, but by denying access to those bodies they are forcing men to reckon with them as more than objects of their desire.

Here again is an illustration of the constant negotiation between discursive meaning and non-discursive experience. Connected to the concepts of legitimacy and authenticity touched on earlier, the gendering of performance in the Limonense comparsas materialises both a 'right way to dance' and an alternate subversive venue for experiential transformation. The choreography as a model of performance, the pre-arranged, legitimate script for action (read text/body), when inserted into actual practice is subject to the variegates of experience (read textuality/embodiment) which acts as a continual undercurrent to the socially constructed legitimacy of the script. It is also an illustration of how the semiotic structure of the performance text can often remain impervious to transformation by this phenomenological undercurrent. The fact remains that even in the empowerment of performance, women must broker their image using the essentialist images structurally/symbolically imposed upon them. True empowerment would provide access to that symbolic structure, allowing the images they negotiate to be of their own creation. Still, as we have seen in the cultural history of Limón Carnaval, the resonance of phenomenological experience can offer a powerful alternative to seemingly immovable ideologies. The essentialist ideal remains intact, but the current of experience carries the human objects of the ideal further downstream toward being subjects of experience who forge their own connections with experience, history, meaning and, ultimately, a collective identity.

The Phenomenology of Performance

In every aspect, from its constitution as discrete groups to the dynamics of its performance, the comparsa is a constitutive event in Limón lived experience; a being-in-the-world experience that cannot speak of Limón without speaking of itself. The comparsas go beyond mere illustrations of the wider cultural context, they are themselves integral to that context, actively participating in its constitution. More than just filling a social role of socialisation or symbolic categorisation, the Limón comparsa forms the basis of a sensibility the foundations of which 'are as wide as social existence itself' (Geertz 1983:92).

The flexibility in the performance and the relative freedom of individuals to perform extemporaneously are both grounded in the unavoidably collective performance of the comparsas. Comparsas must perform in groups, with dancers, singers, and musicians all working together to produce the aesthetic experience. This does not preclude individual innovation within the performance, in fact the aesthetic effect depends on the spontaneity of the timba players, choreographers and solo dancers. In contrast to the canvas artists who act individually, but are directed and constrained by the collective organisation of artists, the comparsas act collectively, but are dependent on the autonomy of the individual performers to express the unique comparsa aesthetic. Both forms search for a unifying identity, and in the process, each finds community.

Canvas artists materialise the Limonense connection to the past. In their re-creation of that past in pigment and canvas, they anchor the collective memory in a nostalgic ideal that celebrates the Afro-Caribbean origins of the cultural landscape. Their expressive style conforms itself to the project, becoming as ordered and predictable as

their images of the past. Though each painter acts in isolation throughout the city, any individual stylistic innovation would defeat the aesthetic goal.

The comparsas of Puerto Limón speak to the restlessness of Limonenses who seek to forge ahead in their construction of a collective self-image. In their expression of that restlessness, the comparsas dance closer to a new, as yet unknown identity. As with the canvas artists, the comparsas expressive style conforms itself to the project, becoming as spontaneous and unpredictable as their image of the future. Though each comparsa acts in concert as a group, individual stylistic innovation is integral to the aesthetic goal.

Apparently disparate in their aesthetic production, canvas artists and comparsas work in harmony toward a collective Limonenses identity. The vision for the future provided by comparsas is anchored in the hold on the past provided by the canvas artists. Through the material production of aesthetic experience around which Limonenses may rally, both participate in the struggle toward the goal of a cohesive community founded on a common identity. Interestingly, both artists and comparsa performers achieve that same goal for themselves in the very throes of the struggle.

Figure 6.1 ~ *From July to November each year, Limón seems to enter a kind of informal marching season where almost every week there is a different excuse to parade school children down the city streets.*



Figure 6.2 ~ *Today, comparsas comprise over ten different groups each consisting of a hundred or more singers, dancers and musicians performing every year on the last day of Limón Carnaval, as well as year-round in parades all over Costa Rica.*



Figure 6.3 ~ *On parade day in Limón Carnaval, onlookers meander through the comparsa performances, sometimes joining in the dance, and always filling the street in the wake of the last comparsa to join in the procession.*



Figure 6.4 ~ *The practice sessions block off an entire street and can be heard from anywhere in the barrio.*



Figure 6.5 ~ *As the Brasileros picked up their beat and began to move, their poly-rhythmic sound and controlled frenzy of movement could not have clashed more with the staid military cadence of the other group.*

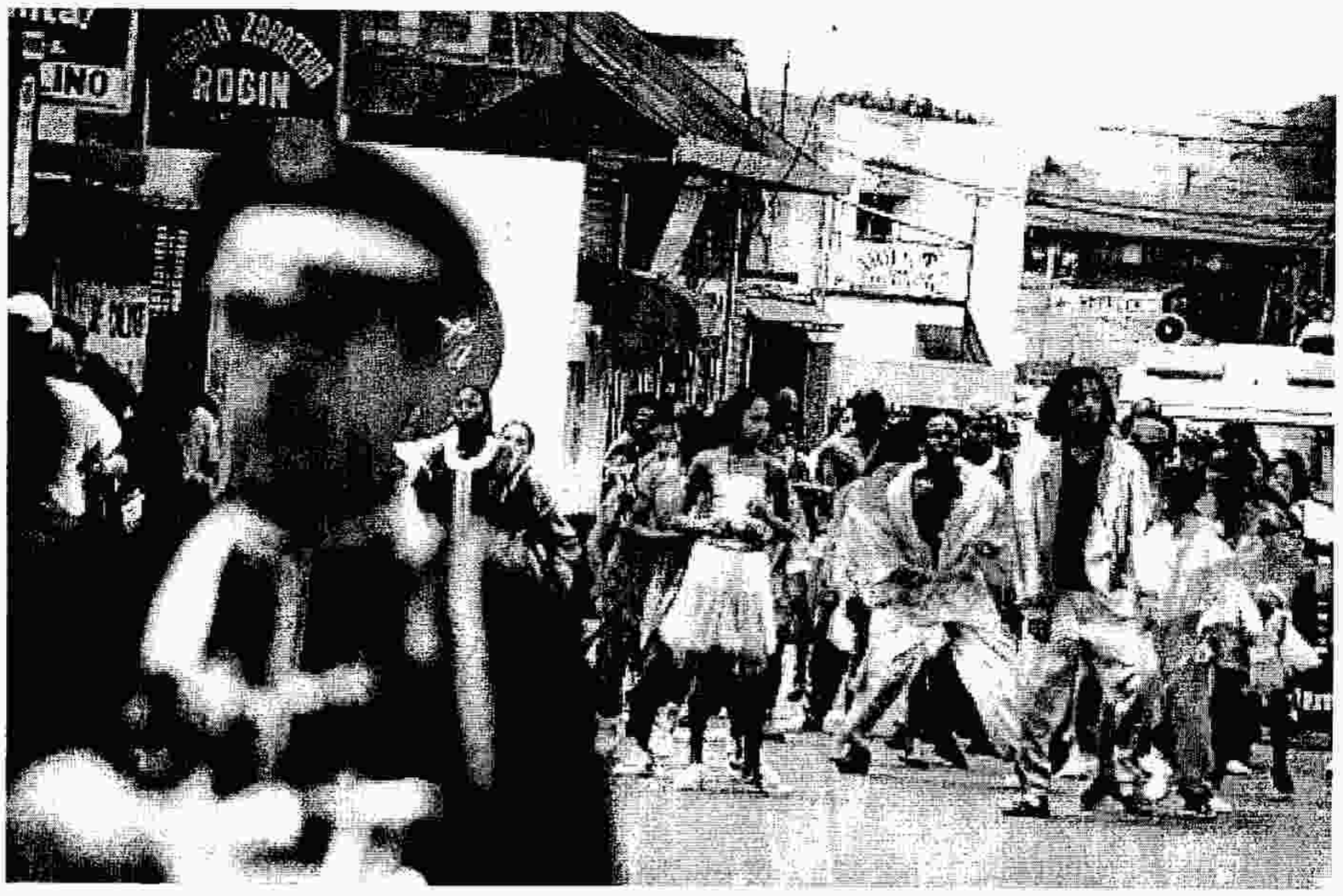


Figure 6.6 ~ *Women must not only submit to the rhythm and pace set by men, but also must submit to the objectifying male gaze as they execute auto and homo-erotic moves in the highly public context of the city street.*



CHAPTER SEVEN

VERSE AND PROSE:

Gender and Power in Limonense Literature

'I think I am very much the memory and the voice of the people of the Limón'.

Eulalia lounged regally in her armchair. The walls of the tiny room were drenched with tapestries, carvings, canvasses, and literary accolades. All collided in a visual richness that conveyed an air of royalty over which she presided with a presence that outshone the props.

'I am like Octavio Paz', she continued, 'I think poetry is the memory of the people. Novels are fine, but they are just novels. Poetry is more honest, more to the point'.

Eulalia leaned forward for the first time, preparing me for her next statement.

'I am the voice of the people, and a memory of the people, but not only of Limón. I see Limón as part of the universe. First as the universe in general, but also the geographical universe, the African diaspora and the diaspora of the working class'.

Eulalia paused for a moment, allowing her words to guild the atmosphere already pregnant with significance.

'I couldn't have written what I have written if I had stuck to writing about Limón. And it could not have influenced as it has from Africa right down to Limón'.

In that moment, Eulalia Bernard was Limón, all women, and Africa.

Oral narrative, long considered *the* traditional cultural form of Afro-Caribbeans (see Dathorne 1981; Abrahams 1983), embodies both the forced dematerialization of the African diaspora through the Middle Passage as well as the inclusive flexibility of African diaspora culture. The slave was a man or woman of words and little else.

But the concept of narrative as non-material is misleading, or at least presupposes a particularly narrow disposition toward materiality. The space in which stories are told, the physical gestures of narrative performance, even the textuality of the stories

themselves engender a material connection between and amongst story tellers and audience.

This cultural materiality enacted through the aesthetic practice of oral narrative was an important part of Limonense cultural development at the turn of the century. Labourers from the West Indies brought with them the rich oral traditions of the English and French Caribbean, and those traditions transformed into a local aesthetic of Anansi stories, Pocomia myths, and legends based on revolutionary banana workers. Decades later the traditions would come down to a few writers like Eulalia Bernard and Quince Duncan who would choose to bear the burden of tradition in a new and changing social world.

I first met the noted Afro-Costa Rican novelist and academic Quince Duncan at the UNIA meeting hall during a lecture given by US author, Clifton Taulbert. Taulbert has gained some prominence in the US for his book *Once Upon a Time When We Were Colored*, a narrative account of the early civil rights movement in Mississippi. His stop in Limón was part of a tour of Costa Rica sponsored by the English department where Duncan is a professor. The turn out was predictably low, but offered an occasion for Taulbert and Duncan to speak on the notion of a universal black experience. Taulbert commented on his overwhelming sense of familiarity with the people of Limón, though this did not preclude a gregarious embrace when he discovered I too was from the States. Duncan spoke about his own experiences travelling to Africa, and the cultural similarities to both Taulbert's books and life in Limón. Afterwards we spoke for a while about the low turn out, and how difficult it is to get locals interested in these kinds of events.

The fact that few Limonenses came to hear Taulbert and Duncan speak illustrates an important point about prose literature in the context of identity formation in Limón.

While the form is fraught with constructions of race, gender and unequal power relations, the fact is few Limonenses actually have access to or read much of what gets published. Unlike canvas art, comparsa music, or, as we shall see, some forms of poetry, prose literature does not directly impact the daily life of Limonenses. This does not temper the indirect influence the work has on the construction of a Limonense identity, as those in the Central Valley, especially academics, do read these books, some of which have achieved a very high status in Costa Rican letters.

The disconnection between literature and the everyday lives of Limonenses marks an important cultural shift over the last few decades. Today, much of the oral tradition of first and second generation Caribbean settlers has disappeared. Much like the commodification of calypso music, the narrative form as an oral art, which once stood as one of the most important cultural markers of Afro-Costa Rican social life, has transformed into print media, pre-packaged and mass produced.

Limón boasts a surprisingly fertile literary tradition that encompasses the published work of Limonense novelists or outsiders writing about Limón, and both the published and unpublished work of local poets. The 1970s witnessed the first boom in Limonense narrative fiction as writers found a Marxist hero to champion in the banana workers of the United Fruit Company. Carlos Luis Fallas, a white Costa Rican from the Central Valley, wrote his most famous novel, *Mamita Yunai*, about the oppressive working conditions and the desperate need for socialist reform. Joaquín Gutiérrez, a white Costa Rican born in Limón, followed with novels like *Puerto Limón* and *Muramonos Federico* that spoke through his new found communist perspective. Quince Duncan began his prolific career at this time as well. Duncan, a young Afro-Costa Rican from Limón, avoided the overt political posturing of his white contemporaries, but

offered a portrait of Limón life which did not shy from the harsher aspects of working and living conditions.

It was during the 1970s that Eulalia Bernard, an Afro-Costa Rican poet from Limón, recorded an album of poetry and music entitled, *Negritud*. Her decision to record her poetry rocked the academic and literary world of Costa Rica, who could not understand why she would not want to first publish a book. As a permanent member of the Pan-African Council and the first to introduce Afro-American Studies in a Latin American university, Bernard was no stranger to controversy in Costa Rica.

By the 1980s, Bernard would publish a book of poetry, *Ritmoheroe*, soon to be joined by Shirley Campbell's *Naciendo*. Campbell was part of the small but growing population of Afro-Costa Ricans not born in Limón. Also an academic, Campbell was trained as an anthropologist. Her collection of poetry, which roughly translates, 'Being Born' or 'Growing Up', chronicles her year-long exploration of Limonense roots in the province.

Before Bernard or Campbell came onto the literary scene, women had undoubtedly been composing verse for years prior. Besides the scores of silent poets who composed and recited their works privately, there were at least a couple of poets who managed to receive some recognition in short-lived local magazines or public recitals.

Today, the creative output of writers concerned with Limón cannot compare to the prolific previous two decades. Many of the writers of those eras have either passed away or turned to strictly academic careers. What should already be apparent in the body of literature available is the division of literary form between men as novelists and women as poets. This chapter explores some of the reasons behind this gender distinction, and analyses the literary products of both men and women to understand more clearly how

poetry and prose are connected to the process of identity formation and the particular cultural aesthetic of Limón.

The Gendering of Literary Style

One might argue that the male dominated field of Limonense prose literature is simply a reflection of Latin American machismo in a male dominated publishing industry. This would not explain the success of women novelists like Carmen Naranja whose focus remains on more mainstream Costa Rican life. Nor would it explain the success of published Limonense poets like Bernard and Campbell. That is not to say that as Afro-Costa Rican women they did not have to fight for the publication of their work, but it does thwart any attempt at a simple explanation for the gendered stylistic dichotomy between poetry and prose.

Putting the stylistic division in a dichotomous relationship is perhaps overstating the case to make an analytical point[1]. But the fact remains that for much of the relatively short history of Limonense prose literature the form has been dominated not only by men, but by white Costa Rican men. Two of the three most famous white Costa Rican authors to write about Limón, Joaquín Gutiérrez and Abel Pacheco, were actually born in the province. Carlos Luis Fallas was born in Alajuela, a highland province, but spent some years working the banana plantations of Limón. As insiders and outsiders, white men are writing the bulk of Limonense narrative, which would indicate a link between perceived socio-political power and the prose narrative form in literature.

The literary development of one author in particular may help illuminate the issues involved. Quince Duncan, the one Afro-Costa Rican who has managed to make a name for himself in Costa Rican letters, is an established novelist, with such acclaimed

works as *El Fin de la Calle*, *Los Cuatro Espejos*, and *La Paz del Pueblo*, and an academic, with the oft-quoted *El Negro in Costa Rica* and *Teoria y Practica del Racismo.* When I spoke with Duncan in the Central Valley where he now lives, I asked him about his unique career as a Limonense novelist. He affirmed the formative role oral narrative played in his development: 'The interest in literature came from several sources. One would be the fact that Afro communities at that time had no radios, no television, and so the grandparents used to tell us stories. Whenever there was a celebration like nine night or Christmas eve, they were always telling these stories, stories to entertain the children and to entertain themselves'. Duncan also spoke of his grandfather and his unusual interest in reading: 'My grandfather was a very non-typical peasant. If he got the newspaper that came in from Jamaica, he wouldn't mind sitting down to read it and forget about the crops, forget about the farm that day. He told me I could go into his library, which was formally under lock and key, and he left it open and said if I wanted I could read anything I could'.

Perhaps most revealing is Duncan's account of the most important influence on his career as a writer:

> Miss Robb used to tell me stories, she was always telling me stories, and reading stories to me. She called me one day and said she had problems with my eyeglasses, and I just got this book and would you help me and read these stories to me. Of course I said yes, but put the book in a corner of my room and forgot about it. One day she called me and said 'Listen, I've been asking about those stories, and you've been telling me you know the next time, next time. Now I've been telling stories to you all your life, and I didn't believe that you would do that to me - knowing that my eyeglasses aren't working and you can not read the stories and come tell them to me.' I felt so bad, so I went home and started reading these stories, and every time I go by Miss Robb's house I tell her a story. Later in my life, I've always thought that this malady with Miss Robb's eyeglasses was a very strange one because I remember seeing her reading the bible in church without any difficulty.

By reading the stories to Miss Rob, Duncan's world was reversed. He became the story-teller to the older generation, and it was an experience that profoundly effected him. The anecdote also illustrates the equal place of men and women in the old oral tradition.

According to Duncan, in the 'traditional framework of the black culture . . . the old man and the old woman at the head of the family told the stories'.

That traditional framework was split apart by the socialising revolution of the 1940s which replaced oral narrative with standardised education. This rupture of tradition may partly explain the subsequent sexual division of literary form. From this perspective, the tradition of oral narrative was split into two distinct aesthetic parts: the oral performance which women carried on in poetry (both published and unpublished); and the presentation of a cultural narrative which Duncan carried on in prose literature.

While this may clarify *how* the gendered division of literary style occurred, it does not answer the glaring question of *why*. Sally Price (1983), in her work on Surinam, indicates a similar gender split in creative style. Her analysis locates the division in the structure of power relations between men and women, where men as the dominant gender reserve the authority to create order. This translates into a male aesthetic of fine detail, geometric shapes, and more representational designs. A similar phenomenon is visible in the art of Australian aborigines (Morphy 1991; Dussart 1997), though here the dynamic is reversed as women are denied access to the iconic symbols of the ancestors and must paint only that which is benignly representational. The two examples indicate there is no universal aesthetic connection between a dominant gender category and a particular stylistic convention, such as representational designs or narrative prose, but it does indicate a more general relationship between power and aesthetic expression.

In the case of Limón, there does seem to be a relationship between the cultural legitimacy of prose literature in the Costa Rican context and the particular gender split in Limonense literary style. It is not just that men write in prose, there are enough women novelists outside Limón to undermine that argument, it is that narrative fiction has long

been the stylistic convention of mainstream Costa Rican society. When the old story tellers of Limón were replaced by the nationalisation of education and the program of colonisation by highland Costa Ricans, women turned to the literary style left open for them, while Duncan seized the opportunity to participate in the literary aesthetic of the dominant group.

The image of women turning to the literary left-overs masks the potential empowerment of poetry. Eulalia Bernard articulates her own reasons for choosing poetry as an expressive form over prose:

> In poetry you can't move away from symbolism. The shorter the poem, to me, the better. People's memory is not in long everlasting sentences. People remember [she claps her hands in time - slap, slap, slap] fragments. Narrative fiction is fine, but they are more linear. You have a lot of room to play around. You remember the force of events, you remember a strike. I wrote a poem about the memory of a strike. You can't do this with narrative fiction. You can narrate the strike, and go into detail and who did what, but its more like journalism. When I perform this poem, the people in Limón just go wild. From the youngest to the oldest. Black, white, red whichever, they really respond to it. It evokes a lot. It makes it universal.

For Bernard, the power of literary expression was found in not turning to the mainstream, but seeking the performance of memory inherent in the oral tradition in a new form. The discovery for her, and many other women, was poetry.

But if this is an explanation of the gender distinction apparent in Limonense literature, it is only a partial one. As was discussed earlier in regard to art versus craft, there is a more consciously practical level at which the aesthetic distinction between verse and prose is intimately linked to the social construction of gender for both men and women in Limón. The fact that Quince Duncan was able to participate in the literary style of the dominant social group hints at the undercurrent of gender inequality that influences so many aspects of creative expression.

Like canvas art, prose narrative, especially the novel, requires an investment of time ordinarily impossible for women constrained to domestic productivity. Where men

are encouraged to cultivate leisure, women are considered idlers if they stray from domestic tasks. Even Elena Pardo, the one known example of a female novelist from Limón, is a retired widow wealthy enough to hire a full time maid and cook. Unlike women a generation ago, who could operate in a culturally legitimate aesthetic sphere as storytellers, most women in Limón today must create in stolen moments, brief snatches of time in the midst of domesticity.

In this context, it is perhaps not surprising that poetry has become the form of choice for Limonense women who choose to pursue literary expression. Through poetry, women retain the performative aspect of storytelling in a literary form that lends itself to brevity. Also, as poetry is easily memorised and does not have to be written down much less published, female poets do not have to submit to publication as a means to legitimisation (though some have with impressive results).

This serves an important dual purpose. As a creative expression that does not have to submit to the legitimising institutions of Limonense or Costa Rican society, poetry carries a certain subversive currency. By turning to poetry, women have enacted an aesthetic shift in response to a socio-political shift. Theirs was a culturally subversive act that challenged the gendered social structure not through overt rhetoric, but in daily aesthetic practice. As a result, that daily aesthetic practice has itself become more overtly subversive. As we shall see below, Limonense poetry challenges Limonense and Costa Rican society in ways few male novelists would have the courage to attempt.

Taken together, the various arguments presented above offer an explanation for the gender division in literary style. This will inform the literary analysis to follow which seeks to carry the various perspectives on power and aesthetics into the works themselves. Some of what has been written by and about Limonenses offer invaluable

insights into the machinations of identity politics and the particular aesthetic system of Limón that the previous few chapters have attempted to reveal.

Power and Prose

Whatever the multi-layered cause of male dominance in Limonense prose literature, it is important to examine how that dominance has affected the way this particular expressive form has constructed race and gender in the Limonense context. Regardless of its relative detachment from everyday life in Limón, prose narrative does exert a considerable influence on the course of identity formation. This is so not only because of the way in which it effects the perceptions of outsiders, which in turn are internalised by Limonenses, but also because of how it has been used politically in the national and local contexts.

Communism and the Appropriation of Blackness

The beginnings of printed prose narrative in Limón are found in the work of Carlos Luis Fallas and Joaquín Gutiérrez. Both were members of the communist party in Costa Rica, and as such, their work has earned a reputation it might not otherwise have achieved. Lorein Powell, in attempting to contexualise this particular brand of Costa Rican literature, explains that 'self-described leftist writers found in prose narrative a useful medium to transmit their political and ideological message, thought at the time as revolutionary to those segments of society with access to their works' (Powell 1988:86). Translated into several languages and published around the world, the stories and novels

of Fallas and Gutiérrez became the beneficiaries of a global network of communist support that ensured their literary longevity.

Carlos Luis Fallas, or 'Calufa' as he is popularly known, came to Limón from the highland province of Alajuela to work as a labourer in the banana fields during the 20s and 30s. After a brief time in San José, he returned to Limón as a member of the communist party to help organise the labour strike of 1934, one of the largest strikes in Costa Rican history. Afterwards he turned to narrative fiction to express his frustration with the global capitalism embodied in the United Fruit Company, and to a lesser extent the Costa Rican government and wealthy land owners who supported them. His first and most famous work, *Mamita Yunai*, which will be examined in detail below, is an overt critique of the UFC (the title itself is taken from the Limonense Creole slang for the 'mother company'), but as we shall see, it also establishes some of the most insidious racial stereotypes that later writers would alternately champion and challenge.

Joaquín Gutiérrez began his writing career almost a decade after Fallas blazed the path. Gutiérrez came to writing by way of an unusual detour. At the time, the university in San José offered only law and pharmacy. 'My older brother was studying law', Gutiérrez explained to me during an interview, 'and I didn't want to study pharmacy. I did not want to sell condoms all day for a living'. Frustrated by the limitations of higher education in Costa Rica, Gutiérrez moved to New York to learn English. From there he travelled to China to translate English into Spanish for the new Communist government. He would eventually spend four years translating in the Soviet Union, and several years in Chile before returning to Costa Rica. When he did return, he was a committed member of the communist party, which had taken up the plight of banana workers in Limón as their rallying cry. His work runs the gamut from one of the most famous children's

stories in Costa Rica, *Cocori*, to influential novels like *Puerto Limón*, which will be discussed below. Taking the cue from Fallas, Gutiérrez's work has been criticised as reinforcing some of the most damaging racial stereotypes even as he claims to support the plight of the worker in Limón.

Duncan and Powell, in their bold academic work, *Teoria y Practica del Racismo*, criticise the communists for what they view as a fickle hypocrisy when it came to Limonense support. Though the communists supported Limonenses in the strike of 1934 and in various other small political skirmishes with the government, 'the conduct of the communist deputies in relation to the discriminatory laws . . . were, to say the least, openly condescending' (Duncan and Powell 1988:72). Though the political ideology of communism was geared toward the plight of oppressed labour in the Limón region, those in positions of power within the party were still white Costa Ricans who held certain intransigent stereotypes in regard to those living along the Caribbean littoral of their country.

The 'open condescension' of the communist deputies toward Limonenses is an inadvertently common theme throughout the work of Gutiérrez and Fallas. In Fallas' *Mamita Yunai*, a largely autobiographical novel, the plot centres around a member of the party sent back to Limón as an agent after many years as a labourer. In Gutiérrez's *Puerto Limón*, a Nicaraguan labour organiser causes trouble for the UFC and a wealthy landowner whose angst ridden nephew is swayed by communist propaganda. Both novels begin with their protagonists on a train, descending the volcanoes into the steamy plains of Limón. This image characterises all of their interactions with Limonenses; the great white hope come to save the poor and downtrodden people of colour.

In Fallas' *Mamita Yunai*, the tendency toward unexamined racism disguised as genuine concern is established and developed. Throughout Fallas' story there are condescending references to Afro-Caribbeans, Chinese, and the various indigenous groups living along the southern coast. The southern portion of the province of Limón, Talamanca, is described as 'a region populated by Indians, for the most part illiterate, speak almost no Spanish, and live a primitive and miserable life' (Fallas 1995:18). Throughout the novel, the diminutive term *negritos* is employed to refer to Afro-Caribbeans. When they are not infantilised, they are demonised as the narrator observes: 'more than men, [the Afro-Caribbeans] looked like black demons with muscles shimmering under the sun' (Fallas 1995:19). Finally, when all analogies are exhausted, Limonenses are likened to the curiously grotesque as Fallas describes the menagerie of passengers on the coastal train: 'Contemplated from a distance, the convoy would give the impression of an extravagant carnival parade, from which rose the muffled rumble of a barbaric and savage party' (Fallas 1995:19).

The reliance on such racist stereotypes to paint the scene of Limón province is all the more surprising through the voice of the autobiographical narrator, allegedly travelling through Limón to alleviate the suffering of oppressed workers. In startlingly incongruous passages, Fallas compassionately expresses the frustration of labourers in Limón: 'There is no work, we can't cultivate the earth, they won't let us earn a living on the Pacific . . . Must we die of hunger then?' Or again, 'The men, with arms raised, shrunken under the weight of their great black bodies, all formed an impressive and macabre whole, resembling a parade of fugitive phantoms. From where have they come and to where are they going, dragging through the centuries the gathered weight of their scorched flesh? Where will they find their promised land?' (Fallas 1995:21,25). But

even here, the compassion is a compassionate distance, evoking the tone of condescension criticised earlier. Images of ghoulish parades, blackness as somehow damaged whiteness ('scorched flesh'), and transient homelessness plague the preceding quote, excluding any hope of Costa Rica as a welcoming promised land.

If there are few moments of genuine empathy in Fallas' treatment of labour reform in Limón, the are even less in Gutiérrez's *Puerto Limón*. In Gutiérrez's novel, the plot revolves around three white Costa Ricans: Don Hector, the wealthy landowner who represents the bourgeois elite, Silvano, Hector's nephew, who represents the petit bourgeois intellectual, and Paraguitas, the Nicaraguan labour organiser who represents the proletariat. These three characters come together in conflict over the plight of the mainly Afro-Caribbean labourers, but of the three black characters in the book, two die of horribly infectious diseases, and the last, Tom, is a pathetically inept foil for the philosophical debate between the main characters. Despite Lisa Davis' startling description of *Puerto Limón* as 'notable for its sympathetic portrait of the Blacks of Limón' (Davis 1984:154), the novel is rife with racial stereotypes and condescension. As Powell observes in her reading of the novel, 'Paraguitas, in his relationship with the black character [Tom], seeks to earn his trust and include him in the class struggle, but at the same time, and in spite of his eagerness, constantly manifests his racism. He 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). Though the blacks of Limón are the *raison d'être* of every white character in the novel, whether the wealthy landowner or the communist labour organiser, they remain marginalised at best, and at worst, a hindrance to the success of the communist revolution. As Powell concludes: 'In *Puerto Limón* we find two messages; one explicit . . . that is a message of liberation for the working class, and the other

implicit . . . that excludes blacks from both the elite or the working class, and places them as a sub-species of humans irredeemably condemned to exploitation' (Powell 1988:111).

In the work of both Fallas and Gutiérrez, the Afro-American presence in Limón, and more specifically the politically charged notion of blackness, has been appropriated by white society. In *Puerto Limón*, the idea of blackness as a disembodied source of political power appeals to the Nicaraguan labour organiser, but once Gutiérrez contexualises that power in a specific body, it becomes emasculated and inept. For Fallas also, the idea of oppression is somehow more palpably inspiring than its embodied victims, though at least for Fallas that embodiment leads to a danger best exported to Panama or the next stop on their lonely search for the 'promised land'.

When I asked Gutiérrez about the accusation of racism in his work, not surprisingly, he defended himself: 'It's not true. They're liars. I love Negroes and Chinese very much. I would rather cut off my hands than write ill of another race. I have very good Negro friends'. We had spoken for some time about his youth in Limón, and, insisting on using his rusty English, he continued, 'My father planted bananas. [He worked] for himself. Limón at that time was very savage, very primitive'. Gutiérrez described his father as a pioneer, establishing his credentials as a Limonense as he spoke. He explained how he appreciated the 'diversity of races' in Limón and how he enjoyed growing up with the 'Chinese and Negroes'. 'When I was six or seven in my father's land, there were many Negroes who were clearing the land. My friends were the Negroes and Chinese. One Negro, Tom, like my father, walked very fast. . . Tom would carry me on his shoulders. Tom Winkleman'. The lone black male character in *Puerto Limón* is none other than Tom Winkleman, a reflection of the autobiographical nature of Gutiérrez's writing. It is also a reflection of the apparent contradiction between his

personal connection to Limón and Limonenses and his overtly racist characterisations. Perhaps anticipating this contradiction, Gutiérrez offered, 'Racial problems? I don't think so. There are no problems. The races are so distinct that they maintain a certain distance'.

Richard Jackson comments on a theme in Latin American literature concerned with black experience that helps contextualise Gutiérrez's comments. Jackson contends that 'though well-meaning, many twentieth-century novelists are too apologetic, patronising, and condescending' (Jackson 1976:45). He goes on to point out that the inevitable reliance on stereotypes by white Latin American authors writing about blacks not only gives 'false if not one-sided images of the black', but also indicates 'racist feelings toward black people among Latin American authors' (Jackson 1976:46).

Gutiérrez, whose poem in the foreword of the novel claims 'I was born next to the sea in Puerto Limón. And its juice boils in my heart. And still it sings its froth on my palate' (Gutiérrez 1973:11), paints a dreary image of the city through the eyes of its young anti-hero, Silvano:

> In the street they heard the siren of a parting ship. It was a languid and melancholy moan as if the ship were leaving a part of its soul ensnared in that port. It was a port like any other on its itinerary, a little port, dirty, primitive and violent. A port in which life moved tumultuously, subdued placidly, distressed suddenly or tortured mercilessly as in Casablanca, Talcahuano, Guayaquil, Tenerife. This was Puerto Limón and here life agitated in its whirlwind thousands of criollos, blacks, and some gringos from distant countries. And the siren seemed to wail for all of them, as if it could understand them and reverberate with their flaccid miseries, with their sleepless tremblings, with their short-lived joys. As if with its long undulating wail it could explain the inexplicable and enable the poor people to gather together in mutual comfort and unite around their pain (Gutiérrez 1973:128).

It is this image of Limón from which Silvano escapes at the end of the *Puerto Limón*, and in like manner Gutiérrez escaped many years ago. 'Culturally, Limón is very small. It was good for the years I was there, but not now', he answered when asked if he could ever go back. One wonders if Gutiérrez's vision in *Puerto Limón* is not representative of

the perceptions of many white Costa Ricans living in Limón; caught in a dreadful place against their will, struggling to escape.

Limonenses and the Re-Appropriation of Blackness

In 1972, Abel Pacheco, a white Costa Rican born in Limón, published a collection of stories called *Más Abajo de la Piel*. In the opening essay, Pacheco writes:

> The black man was not brought here, he was called and came. It was he who . . . parted the mountains with the railroad and opened a new country to the world. The swamp that had swallowed up the Indian, the Criollo, the Italian, the Chinese, respected the great black man. The nation paid them by isolating them. Closing them off with a highland law. They survived because they are eternal. I know them . . . my grandmother fed me white milk from black breasts. For my province, my song and my hope is for a world that loves deeper than skin. (Pacheco 1972:11).

Pacheco's strong feelings toward Limón are indicative of those who have embraced the pariah status of the 'black' province, and brought 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.

Abel Pacheco and Quince Duncan offer an alternative literary history for Limón. As communist prose of the 50s and 60s co-opted blackness as a political ideal while remaining contemptuous of its actual embodiment, Pacheco and Duncan have worked to re-appropriate and re-locate the powerful notion of blackness in the lived bodies of Limonenses.

Part of this process is a literary reconstruction of history. In 'Sigatoka y Similares', Pacheco offers a particularly insightful tale of Mista Waca 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 were 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).

Pacheco not only recreates in miniature the historical transformation of Limonenses cultural geography, but he does so in the style of the Trickster tradition of Caribbean oral narrative. This not only re-appropriates the history of the region, it also re-locates that history in a Caribbean context through a distinctly Caribbean voice. Pacheco also empowers the notion of blackness in the Limonense context by associating it with the living organism that drove out the mighty UFC and painted the 'blonde bananas' black.

Quince Duncan also offers a revisionist history of life in the early years of Limón. In the short story 'La Rebelión Pocomia' that starts off the collection by the same name, Duncan describes the frustration of some French Caribbean labourers concerning their new life in Limón:

> Images of his old homeland in Santa Lucia fill the night. Blasted stupidity that made him give up so much beauty in exchange for an untameable jungle that sacrifices men for the progress of a nation that was not their own.
>
> Naïve, too. Chronic naivete that dreams of a better world. The almost forgotten image of that Englishman who garbled his French: 'Plenty money, plenty fruit, good government benefits. Nice people, but a little backwards. No resistance to colonisation. Land while you're in Costa Rica and a boat to return whenever you like.'
>
> 'Alright.'
>
> Puerto Limón. Sounded like a fairytale world to him with all the blessings a Santa Lucian could dream of and a guaranteed trip back home. . .
>
> Death cuts off a thousand lives in the first twenty-five miles. Death lurks in every nook and cranny. And the Jamaicans keep on working, indifferent to it all. Faithful to Master Keith.
>
> A blood-forged railroad, he thinks, a blood-forged railroad. He thinks and keeps on along his odorous route. He thinks and continues engrossed in his accumulated rancour. (Duncan 1995:123-125)

Duncan retells the story of Limón's development from the perspective of the workers, giving them a voice to express their own frustration. Perhaps more importantly for this particular narrative, Duncan makes a distinction between the French and English Caribbean, offering an alternative to the traditional synthesis of all the migrant labourers into one homogenous Afro-Caribbean group. In this story, Duncan implies that not only

were the immigrant groups distinct, it was their difference that made it so difficult to organise resistance against the UFC or the Costa Rican government. The final lines are spoken by one of the French Caribbean organisers of a failed rebellion: 'She cursed all the Jamaicans in Limón. ""They will always be like crabs in a barrel", she uttered with her last breath, "no one will ever succeed because the other will block him"" (Duncan 1995:134).

Through the reclamation of Limonense history, Duncan and Pacheco also overtly critique the appropriation of blackness in earlier prose narrative. In the story, 'Modier', Pacheco writes of those who left homes in Jamaica, Trinidad and Barbados to come to Limón. It is a short piece that evokes some of the excitement of early migrant labourers, but the main character, Modier, never arrives at the port. According to Pacheco, 'the gods of the sea asked for the blood of a black man so they might forever have rhythm in their waves' (Pacheco 1972:38). Pacheco uses a typical Afro-American stereotype, natural rhythm, to symbolise an ideal blackness that is swallowed up by the sea in a miniature middle passage. There is an implication of personal loss as migrants from various islands were synthesised into one Afro-Caribbean identity, but there is also the implication of a violent appropriation of blackness by the same sea whites had used for years to take advantage of black labour.

In the recognition and critique of the appropriation of blackness by outsiders, Pacheco and Duncan also use their narrative to confront the socio-political oppression of Limón that communist literature purported to address. In 'Langostas', Pacheco describes the Limonense lobster fishermen who send their catch far away to 'grand salons of caviar, truffles, and things you've never seen, much less tasted [where] the elegant whites eat the lobsters' (Pacheco 1972:22). In 'Mulas', Pacheco muses on the fate of the mules that

once hauled bunches of bananas through the plantations which are now pulled on cables by labourers. 'What did they do with the mules? Did they kill them? Did they let them loose in the mountains knowing that they, thanks to man, would never be able to multiply? . . . Last night I dreamed that another machine arrived that cut the bunches . . . wrapped them and loaded them on the ship. In the dream, I asked: What happened to the men?' (Pacheco 1972:41).

In 'La Rebelión Pocomia', Duncan invokes the rallying cry of communist literature, but in a distinctly Caribbean voice. When the character Jean Paul loses his brother to a collapsed bridge, he blames 'the foreman's indifference, one of those English guys who was all mouth and white jacket' (Duncan 1995:125). Jean Paul turns his anger into subversive action, and later, 'at the gravesite Jean Paul spoke to the other workers. He made them see – as tears streamed down his peasant face – the fundamental injustice of his brother's death; and he called on them . . . to declare a total strike, to force the Company to concede to the workers' demands' (Duncan 1995:125-126). Taking the struggle away from 'openly condescending' outsiders who come down from the highlands, Duncan places it in the hands of the workers themselves.

Throughout the work of Pacheco and Duncan, there is a focus on the flexibility and inclusiveness of ethnic identity. This is balanced by an emphasis on black experience as the foundation for this flexibility, a paradox overcome by the inclusive nature of blackness as a phenomenological category of experience and not an essentialist racial identification. As Jackson observes, 'Duncan points toward integration in the larger Costa Rican society but on black terms' (Jackson 1976:128). This is most poignantly demonstrated in the story 'Descubrimiento' by Pacheco (1972:13) that describes his own discovery as a child that he was different from his Afro-Costa Rican playmates. The

discovery is precipitated by white Costa Ricans from the Central Valley visiting his family and openly discussing 'the blacks' of Limón. Both Pacheco and Duncan challenge the categories established by outsiders in their search for a more amalgamated notion of Limón identity rooted in an inclusive blackness.

Gender in Male Authored Prose

As men have dominated the realm of narrative fiction, certain patterns have developed in the literary construction of gender in Limón. One of the most consistent patterns to run through Limonense novels is the Mother/Lover dichotomy where the female character is either a matriarchal, and usually a-sexual, figure or a purely sexual, and usually unattainable, object.

By way of introduction to this Mother/Lover dichotomy in Limonense literature, this analysis will begin at the beginning with Joaquín Gutiérrez's beloved children's story, *Cocori*. Translated into several languages, enjoying continual reprinting, and winning numerous awards, Gutiérrez's children's story stands as one of clearest examples of this dichotomy. As a children's book, it is the advanced guard of socialisation into the gender constructions of Limonense literature.

The story revolves around Cocori, a small, Afro-Costa Rican boy in an Eden-like setting somewhere on the Caribbean coast of Costa Rica. He lives with his mother, the matriarch figure of the story. Spying a passing cruise ship, Cocori travels along with local traders to the ship where he meets a nameless cruise passenger. Not surprisingly, she is a young white girl with blond hair and blue eyes, the lover figure of the story. He promises to bring her a monkey as a pet, and thus begins his adventure through the jungles of Limón.

Through the narrative of *Cocori*, Gutiérrez establishes the Mother/Lover dichotomy with two archetypal characters: Cocori's mother and the girl on the cruise ship. Cocori's mother has no husband, and we are left with the impression that Cocori had no father. She is the quintessentially sexless matriarch who literally slaves away as provider for her child. As such, Cocori's mother is the embodiment of wisdom and rationality. Devoid of passion, she is able to impart knowledge to Cocori, that he may or may not heed. This image is buttressed by the other matriarchal figure of the story, doña Modorra, a large female sea turtle who counsels Cocori on his quest.

The young girl on the cruise ship neatly sums up the passionate, and unattainable, sex object in the story. The image of a looming cruise ship filled with wealthy passengers on holiday passing the backward, stereotypically primitive, jungle coast sets up the inevitable futility of Cocori's quest. The unreasonable request of a pet monkey further stresses the young girl's role as the irrational foil to Cocori's eventual coming of age. Not surprisingly, when Cocori returns with the monkey, the ship has sailed with the girl and he is left with only his mother to comfort him.

By fleshing out the archetypal Mother/Lover dichotomy in Cocori, Gutiérrez also establishes the implicit racial aspect of this particular gender construction. The matriarchal, a-sexual character in Limonense literature is almost invariably associated with blackness, a development not unlike that of southern literature and film in the US. The unattainable sex object of Limonense literature follows a slightly more complex but no less racist pattern. As in *Cocori*, the young boy, as an Afro-Costa Rican, longs for the young white girl. As we will see in other contexts, if the central male character is white, the sexual object is almost invariably black. Thus two important aspects of any racist

structure is represented, the sexless and therefore non-threatening black matriarch, and the deep-rooted taboo of racial mixing between sexes.

Gutiérrez fleshes out the black matriarchal figure in other of his longer novels. Through the character of Azucena in *Puerto Limón*, Gutiérrez not only reinforces this particular image of Afro-Costa Rican femininity, but also invokes an incredible array of racial stereotypes in her description:

> . . . a black woman, innocent as a child, that had striven all her life to be a good cook, to have the floors shine like mirrors and to memorise all the hymns of the half-dozen religions that they practised in the Port so she could go from mass to mass on Sundays, from wooden church to wooden church, singing them. That was her joy, her great joy, almost as great as she felt when given permission to go to her brother's house and mend her nephews' clothes and leave Tom, with timidity and infinite delicacy, a part of her salary underneath the pillow so he could give it to his little boys, abandoned as they were from the hand of God since Ruby's death (Gutiérrez 1973:128-129).

The infantilisation, the domesticity, the religiosity, the poverty, all converge on the matriarchal figure of Azucena who is made to bear the burden of her entire race in the eyes of her white Costa Rican author. Ruby, Azucena's sister-in-law and, as a stable, married woman, the only other Afro-Costa Rican female in the novel who might have undermined the stereotype, was killed off early in the story.

In as much as Quince Duncan redresses some of the issues surrounding power and blackness, his works are not immune to some of the same patterns Gutiérrez employs in the construction of gender. This is evident in such works as *La Paz del Pueblo* and *Los Quatro Espejos*, but Duncan also offers more balanced images of women in his short stories.

Donald Gordon (1989) describes sexuality as one of the dominant themes throughout Duncan's work. As Gordon comments: 'sexual desire dictates the behaviour of some important characters: women are frequently the victims of violations or violent intentions' (Gordon 1989:91-92). This is certainly true of *La Paz del Pueblo*, which

deals with the broad themes of nationalism and identity filtered through certain gender conventions. In this novel, the stereotypes fleshed out in the work of Gutiérrez are seen in the characters of Mariot and Sitaira. Mother and daughter, Mariot and Sitaira are a mysterious pair, suspected of witchcraft, and the objects of desire for several male characters in the novel. Mariot, at one point attacked by Miguelino, puts up no resistance to her attacker's inevitable impotence (Duncan 1986:133). Sitaira, stalked and attacked by Cato, only just barely escapes, leaving Cato 'naked, humiliated, his dignity tarnished by a woman, his passion frustrated' (Duncan 1986:85).

Another representative work is *Los Quatro Espejos*, the personal odyssey of a Limonense man and his various marriages. Dealing overtly with the issues of identity, blackness, and *mestizaje*, Duncan's novel also evokes some of the underlying gender issues in narrative prose. The most blatant is the psychological sorting out of one's identity through a male perspective. The main character, Charles, who goes through several wives in his quest for self-identification, is set up as the archetypal figure of an uprooted Limonense unsure of his past or his place in the present and future. Finally coming to grips with his rootedness in Limón, Charles settles into an acceptance of his blackness without revoking his integration into the dominant white society. What makes the scenario problematic is the use of women as foils to achieve that male centred notion of identity. As Donald Gordon points out: 'the diverse sexual relations that he [Charles] maintains, serve to emphasise his confusion in the search for true personal satisfaction' (Gordon 1989:47). The Everyman figure is meant to represent every man, excluding women from the same feelings of alienation and the same struggle for self-identification.

Elsewhere in Duncan's work, these same gender constructions are undermined, particularly in his short stories. Here we often see strong female characters who embody

both the wisdom and capability of the matriarch without losing the potent sexuality of the lover. In the story 'Una Canción en la Madrugada' (Duncan 1995:38-51), Duncan paints a prose portrait of an ordinary Afro-Costa Rican couple. The story is revelatory in its ordinary-ness, there is no overt political or social point to be made. There is only a loving couple, loving their children, and stealing what moments they can to be together: 'chores will come with daylight: hard work, sweat, the searing drought. . . But for now, it is a portrait, a black portrait that rocks, that throbs with love in John's and Myra's hearts. Yes, love, and love is a song at dawn' (Duncan 1995:39). In 'Un Regalo para la Abuela' (Duncan 1995:60-67), Duncan completely reverses the typical gender conventions in having the main male character dress up like a woman to avoid conscription in the civil war. Not only does the male character retain his masculinity throughout, but femininity is portrayed as source of strength.

These and other of Duncan's stories help balance the traditional construction of gender in male authored prose, but the stylistic conventions are difficult to dislodge. To effectively critique the trend, women must have a voice. As in other arenas of aesthetic expression, women find their voice by operating outside the bounds of literary legitimacy, that is, prose narrative. As we shall see, female authored poetry effectively undermines the stereotypes constructed in prose narrative not only through the content of the compositions, but also through the dynamics of the expressive form itself.

The Empowerment of Verse

In each of the preceding chapters, gender has surfaced as an important modality of experience in the negotiation of identity, especially as it relates to a cultural aesthetic system. The particular experience of women in space and place, art and craft, and music

and dance is perhaps most acutely expressed in the rhymed verse, published and unpublished, of Limonense women. By creating their own niche outside the 'legitimate' forum of commercial publication (or at least challenging the conventions of that forum), women poets tap into the same source of power that women artisans appropriate in the tourist art market. By emphasising the performative aspect of verse, women poets tap into the same source of power that women dancers appropriate in the comparsa. Through these avenues of empowerment, women have used poetry to comment on and critique not only the often repressive construction of gender in Limón, but also the overarching milieu of regional dis-empowerment felt by all Limonenses.

Publication and Legitimacy

As with the artisans who operate outside the sphere of legitimacy in the Limonense art world, women poets, for the most part, remain unpublished and therefore excluded from the 'legitimate' sphere of Costa Rican literature. As such, women poets are much like the storytellers of earlier generations, whose performances operated within a local sphere, on an internal value system of legitimacy. On another level, unpublished can also mean 'not for the public,' amounting to a privatisation of expression among women.

Because it is often privatised, Limonense women's poetry is infrequently encountered, especially by the occasional anthropologist. Still, those moments when it was revealed hinted at a much deeper and far-reaching phenomenon. I have already mentioned the small poetry reading on Negro Day, but there was also the quiet young woman who found the courage to read one of her poems in church and later confessed to her passion for composing verse, or the middle-aged neighbour who would invite my wife and I for rum and coke and private readings of her poetry.

These and other occasions helped clarify the local reworking of expressive legitimacy among women in Limón. By appropriating their own space for creative expression, women poets are reclaiming the internal value system of legitimacy established by earlier generations. By operating outside the boundaries of a received, outsider's aesthetic system, women poets are challenging that system through their very existence. More than the words they use, though those are powerful themselves, women poets are offering a phenomenological critique – a critique vis-à-vis being-in-the-world by being outside the world of so-called aesthetic legitimacy. It should not be surprising that women are the ones at the forefront of this challenge since they are all too familiar with the notion of exclusion and operating on the outside of established boundaries.

The challenges made by the grass-roots poetry of local Limonense women is buttressed by the two prominent examples of published women poets. Eulalia Bernard and Shirley Campbell have both published collections of poetry in Costa Rica and gained some notoriety in the United States and elsewhere. As Quince Duncan and Abel Pacheco have taken advantage of access to the elite, outsider's construction of legitimacy to critique certain structural, ideological inconsistencies in the dominant society's view of Limón and Limonenses, Bernard and Campbell have used their access to literary legitimacy to critique more than ideology.

Perhaps the best example of this is Eulalia Bernard's first publication. After starting a successful career as an academic, and one of the first professors of Afro-American studies in Costa Rica, Bernard used her increasing notoriety to push an alternative approach to poetry publication. I will let Eulalia explain in her own words:

> I started the Afro-American studies at the university level because I felt that it should not be a folkloric approach, which is the kind of approach that dominant groups give to other groups, they play with them at the folkloric level. My album was the first protest to that. That's why I did not write a book, I recorded a record. It's more modern, and it could get

> to the people because it's oral tradition. So people could listen to it. If I started with a book, many times books don't get where you want them to get. You have to be good reader, and some people can't read that well so you can't get to them. With a record it was 'boom!'. . .That's why I made the album, because that was getting out of the system. It had a lot of messages. I was also challenging the system. Saying, 'I don't need to write a book'. After, of course, I did books, but I purposefully did not write a book [at first]. And I got the reaction I wanted, because the status quo was very angry and the people were very happy. And now everybody is happy.

Bernard, conscious of her position in regard to the dominant non-black society, purposefully chose to record an album as a challenge to the structure of legitimisation in Costa Rican literature. Unlike prose narrative, which rarely enters of the lifeworld of Limonenses, the poetry of Eulalia Bernard, like the poetry of so many Limonense women, was born in the Limón and intended for Limonenses. By recording an album, Bernard was able to maintain a connection to the performative aspect of poetry, which in her view gives it much of its power.

Performance and Authenticity

In as much as most Limonense women poets have not achieved, or even attempted, national publication, local poetry remains relatively private. As a private performance, or at least, a performance that women control, poetry opens a venue for empowerment.

This issue of control becomes more clear in instances where women do decide to share their compositions. One woman, who had asked my help in typing up some of her poems, carefully checked over my transcriptions to make corrections. She explained: 'the way the poems sound is as important as what the words mean, and one incorrect word would change everything'. She talked about the rhythm of a poem and how word choice affected that rhythm. 'I don't like other people to recite my poetry. When I write a poem, I hear it in my head. I know how it is suppose to sound'. She, like other poets, approaches poetry as performance art rather than a strictly literary style.

Eulalia Bernard shares this approach to poetry, as illustrated in her decision to make an album before she published a book. For Bernard, live performance is also still very important: 'I usually deliver my poetry in performances, and that is better for the people. They can feel it and respond. Sometimes I would recite a poem and they would respond. Especially the poems in Creole [Limón Standard English], they respond, they'll answer me, they'll say things'. She describes the performance aspect of poetry as a union between the dramatic and oral arts. For her, poetry is not merely recited, but performed in the full sense of the term. Recently, Bernard has toured with a calypso band, singing their songs and her poetry together.

Bernard's link with calypso music illustrates the fluidity of poetry's expressive boundaries, which subverts the constraints of literary legitimacy in favour of cultural authenticity. The performance aspect of poetry links it with expression in music and dance beyond Bernard's creative use of calypso. The act of poetry performance, which women control completely, takes the dancing of the comparsa, which women only partially control, a step further as a locus of empowerment. The source of its power lay in its ability to act outside the dominant society's sanctioned bounds of 'legitimacy' (the right way to write), and connect with Limonenses on a phenomenological level through the embodiment of aesthetic expression which is inside the more fluid and locally constructed boundaries of 'authenticity'.

Poetry and the Subversive Voice

Having created a space in which to create in an authentic Limonense voice, women poets have had much to say through their compositions. Though there are some clear polemics running through the various works, it is difficult to pin down one particular message of

the poetry. Many convey simple truths about life in Limón or life in general, but their access to the expression of this simplicity is itself a subtle subversion of their expected roles as women.

As an expressive form in which women maintain control over the creative process, Limonense poetry, perhaps not surprisingly, has become a forum to directly critique the construction of gender. According to Eulalia Bernard's poem, 'To women's Liberation', 'The Problem is not the Difference / But the Interference. . . / This is the way I see it' (Bernard 1991:20). In her poem, 'Equal Opportunities', Bernard writes: 'You need: / Low moral pressure, zero dignity. / If you be a woman. . ., forget virginity. / Bless the Lord for **Equality**. . .; / 'With the sweat of thy brow thou shalt / Find thy bread.' . . .or, maybe it read: / 'With the cold sweat of your hungry body / Thou shalt . . . _____' (Bernard 1991:29).

But this critique does not necessarily call for a reorganisation of gender roles, rather it seeks the valorisation of 'women's roles' among Limonenses. This can most clearly be seen in the poetry dedicated to motherhood. In the unpublished poem, 'A Una Madre', by Vera Beatriz, motherhood is extolled in lines like, 'Mother Eternal. / Until the end / Your pain is that of all mothers / When they see they are losing a child' and '. . . to God / Who made mothers / To help Him / Guide Humanity. / Woman, Mother. Mother. / Until the end'[2]. Bernard, in her poem, 'Intangible Love', contrasts a child's simple question, 'Mama; you love me?' with a stanza expressing the unspoken sacrifices through which mother's communicate love. The last two lines summarise the point: 'Well son a glad you find out say / That Black mother's love is intangible' (Bernard 1991:37).

Beyond motherhood, Limonense poetry brings to the surface other spheres of women's experience. In Bernard's poem, 'Sublimation', she expresses some of the

frustration of a wife caught in a loveless marriage: 'Are you growing tired . . .? / Of what? . . ., my burning tenderness? / Don't worry! There has not been / A slight instant of fury in / My disappointment; / Just a sudden childlike disenchantment, / Which, I myself have discovered . . . / But have secretly recovered / To keep the wedding march melody / Alive, in my fantasy' (Bernard 1991:51) Though Bernard maintains an image of fulfilment in marriage alive in her fantasy, the obvious subtext of the poem points to the agony of that position. Again, the thrust of the poem is less an attempt to transform society and more an expression of experience that is rarely articulated publicly.

Bernard's poetic approach to gender roles does not exclusively focus on women's experience. As Kitzie McKinney observes, 'unlike many black women writers, particularly of the Caribbean, who represent the male as an absent or negative figure, Eulalia Bernard remembers the experience of her community as Antillean male immigrants founded settlements, sent for families, and supported their communities' (McKinney 1996:15). Much of Bernard's poetry valorises men, as demonstrated in the most recent collection of poems, *My Black King*, dedicated to 'all the men of my family . . . [who] have given me a beautiful childhood, challenging adolescence and creative adulthood'. (Bernard 1991:3). The poems 'Straight Talk' and 'My Black King' illustrate Bernard's commitment to men as part of the key to gender equality:

Straight Talk

I love men with appeal.
Broad shoulders, tall limbs,
Dark skin, pouted pants seam,
And dimples wherever possible.

I love men. . . who can be
Good friends; important fathers
Witty even in their compliments;
Do not read Readers Digest!
But play baseball or tennis instead

I love men . . . that

My Black King

Royalty is carved on your forehead,
King of the Ashanties you shall be,
In these far off lands overseas.

I tremble with pride, when I see . . .,
The look of power in your black eyes.
Power to rule, power to love,
Power to cry.

I see your black body, blooming
Every morning, with sweet sweat,
From forced labour, to free labour;

Rank high in knowledge of the past;
Experience the present and
Breathe the future.

I love men. . . who appeal. . .
To my 'common senses.' (Bernard 1991:17)

From boredom, to freedom.
And I tremble again with pride
And I cry. . .: 'My Black King,
Here is your bride!' (Bernard 1991:18)

Bernard's valorisation of men in her poetry is a conscious part of her desire to rehabilitate a local Limonense sense of self, a cohesive identity for the city and the region. As such, her poetry focuses on men and women, critiquing the structural inequalities that effect both. In her own words: 'I think what happened during slavery, good and bad, had to do with the male. If there was anything intentional in carrying out the policy of racism it was directed to the male. Because they are the procreators and they are the providers, if you can get the males to internalise their dependency and their weakness then you have an easy road to domination. So I subvert that'. Bernard views the effects of racism as unevenly distributed between men and women, each requiring a special rehabilitative approach in her poetry. This position echoes what I have mentioned elsewhere in this thesis about gender differentiation in identity formation. Simply put, women have the added complication of 'a gender' in the negotiation of a Limonense identity that hinges mostly on men sorting through 'an ethnicity'.

Bernard and other women poets in Limón serve as an important corrective to this dilemma in two crucially important ways. First, by emphasising the taken-for-granted notion of 'male-ness', women poets insert the modality of gender into the experience of identity for both men and women. Second, as we shall see, by appropriating the language of ethnicity, women poets situate themselves on equal footing with men in the on-going negotiation of collective Limonense identity.

With the recording of the album *Negritud*, and the publication of *Ritmoheroe*, Eulalia Bernard blazed the path for women's critique of Limonense and Costa Rican

society. Joined by Shirley Campbell with her poetry collection, *Naciendo*, the two Afro-Costa Rican women poets established a clear challenge to the status quo that was partially feminist, but mostly operating outside gender categories to assert their own perspective on racial and ethnic discrimination. Both women are also academics, Bernard in Afro-American studies and Campbell in anthropology, which adds a certain amount of intellectual legitimacy to their attempts to express an authentic Limonense aesthetic.

In her poem, 'Deseo', Bernard demonstrates a feminist approach to cultural critique: 'I have the sensation / of a tormented womb / when in my solitary nights / I think of / my fight, abandoned / by my fragile body, / outstretched in bed. / I wish I could devour an / ounce of Solomon's strength / to continue the / construction of the redemptive temple / of my / people: Limón' (Bernard 1982:27-28). Bernard's focus on the literal embodiment of the struggle to build a cohesive identity for Limonenses is important for its overt representation of that body as female and the likening of the struggle to giving birth. Shirley Campbell also places the struggle of self-identification in a female body in her poetry: 'I birthed children without white flesh / I gave them these black breasts / Without white milk / But with the restoration of dreams / (because life's blood returns to us / from so much struggle for liberty) / . . . / I brought them the day, wet to the touch / with a small taste / like earth / or new life / like love that creeps / within the womb (Campbell 1988:13). Both poets provide insight into an overtly feminist perspective long silenced in the struggle for regional self-identification in Limón. According to McKinney, this trend in Bernard's poetry, and by extension the work of other poets in Limón, is motivated by the desire to 'transform the female body from a passive,

stereotyped sex object to a poetic and political symbol and agent of change' (McKinney 1996:15).

But their participation in that struggle, and that of lesser known, unpublished poets, also includes a more general critique of ethnic and racial essentialism. This often translates into a direct appropriation of blackness from the rhetoric of repression among outsiders for use as an internal rallying point for self-identification. One local poet, Prudence Bellamy, in her poem, 'No Debo Ninguna Disculpa', writes:

I don't need to apologise
because my skin is black
I don't need to apologise
because my skin shines
like velvet . . .

. . . Nor do I need to apologise
because
by the divine gift
of my physical strength
I contributed to the socio-
economic development
of so many nations in the world. . .

. . . Because, after all,
I am Poetry
I am Rhythm
I am Song
I am a Human Being
Who loves her
brothers and sisters.[3]

Shirley Campbell offers her own poem of encouragement toward self-identification: 'Let's fill ourselves with tomorrow's victories / dream men of stone / and of fire / pierce love / and struggle / discover skin / and history / only then / do we begin'. (Campbell 1988:10).

The invocation of blackness comes most often from Eulalia Bernard in poems like, 'My Black King', quoted earlier, and 'Requiem a mi primo Jamaiquino [Requiem to my Jamaican cousin]': 'He had detours and more detours / from white papers from white hands / to say simply: / "I am a Negro from the field, / from Star Valley. / I am a black star / in the bright white, blue and red / of our flag"' (Bernard 1982:36). In poems like 'My Last Chains' and 'Esencia Antillana [Antillian Essence]', Bernard connects to a more essentialised blackness: 'I shall break my last chains / Never more shall I say "Fatherland" / My compatriots I shall seek / throughout the magnitude of the Universe; / From among those, in whose eyes / I am reflected' (Bernard 1991:45). In perhaps the

clearest example of Bernard's poetic connection to the more general African diaspora, 'Nosotros [We]', she writes:

We yearn for other seas
We dream of other forests
We feel other gods
We are others here
We are others there
We are others. . .
. . . We breath other air
We intone other songs
We invoke other gods
We live dead here
We die alive there
We are dead . . .
. . . Let us knock down those forests
Let us search for new seas
Let us invent our gods
Let us intone fresh songs
We are (Bernard 1982:91-92).

There is a separatist tone in these poems that reflects the same ideological claims of a universal black identity, evident in cultural practices such as Negro Day and Carnaval. Bernard aligns herself with the politics of pan-Africanism in her poetry and her academic life, overlaying her poetic depiction of Limón with the rhetoric of this ideological position. In the epigraph at the beginning of this chapter, Bernard describes herself as the voice and memory of not only Limón, but the entire African diaspora and the 'diaspora of the working class'. Much like the academicising of Limonense art in the work of Juan Kelly and Mario Castro, Bernard has placed Limón in a universal context, objectified as a small part of a much wider black community. While this lends power to the struggle for some semblance of cultural autonomy for the region and the city of Limón, it also runs the risk of diverging from the lived experience of Limonenses.

In light of earlier discussions of ideology and lived experience, it is perhaps not surprising that local, unpublished poets are composing a much less essentialised notion of blackness. Their poems more often uplift blackness as an inclusive, flexible nexus of identification without denying the intersection of various other ethnic influences. Vera Beatriz, a white Costa Rican, in her poem, 'Limón', writes: 'I love Limón / . . . / For its blacks, a proud race and / brave, that made us different / and at times special / . . . / Limón, mixture of races and colours / . . . / Limón, music and flowers / Joyful and colourful / . . . / They invite us to sing, to dance, / To dream, to dream . . .'[4] Prudence

Bellamy, an Afro-Costa Rican, in her poem, also entitled 'Limón', writes: '. . . / Limón / Where we all live together / Because / Limón lives in the heart of / Each one of us'.[5] This more amalgamated notion of Limonense identity fits with the comments many make about the sense of Limonense-ness, often identified as Caribbean-ness, that builds upon blackness in the formation of a flexible, internally constructed, multi-ethnic identity. But just as an ideological blackness runs the risk of essentialism, a 'colour-blind' approach to cultural cohesion runs the risk of masking repression behind the Latin American spectre of 'racial democracy'.

The Literary Aesthetic and Identity Formation

Eulalia Bernard's album, *Negritud*, begins with several minutes of 'funk' music indicative of the 1970s in which it was recorded. The music fades and a booming voice with an echo effect announces, '*Negritud*!'. Over twenty years later, Bernard's anthology, *My Black King*, carries many of the poems written for *Negritud*, divided into dramatic Acts, and interspersed with sketches by Mario Castro. The two works show more continuity than difference, and both reflect the striving toward authenticity and the aesthetic of everyday experience in women's poetry.

Women's poetry in Limón is particularly important because of the way in which it incorporates other aspects of the cultural aesthetic system. This includes not only music and the plastic arts as illustrated above, but also the connection to the history of oral narrative in the region. As Bernard and other women poets position themselves as the memory of the people they are connecting to the past and in the process re-connecting Limonenses to older expressive traditions. Men may be able to re-tell the stories in prose

literature, but for women poets, they are evoking the experience of the past in its multi-layered connection to the overarching Limonense aesthetic.

In the preceding pages I have linked male authored prose with a discursive, ideological construction of meaning and women's poetry with a more phenomenological notion of aesthetics and identity. Of course the reality is not so hard and fast as contemporary literature filters into Limonense experience at different levels and at varying degrees. The salient point in all of this is the place of gender as a modality of blackness in Limonense identity. Gender is an important mode in which blackness is experienced and ascribed to, and the differences between verse and prose, especially in regard to legitimacy and authenticity, illustrate this dynamic in Limón.

As dominant groups set up boundaries of creative legitimacy, forms and styles become codified into aesthetic ideals which are perceived as immovable icons of taste. As we have seen, cultural forms that are reified into ideal types immediately establish themselves as stagnate eddies in the swirling movement of lived experience. As such, space is created for new forms, or at least more flexible forms, to connect with experience in a more authentic, though not necessarily legitimate way. This is what I have referred to as experiential transformation in the ongoing dialectic between discursive ideology and non-discursive lived experience.

Hinted at throughout the thesis, and given more space in this chapter, is the notion that gender, specifically women's embodiment of gender, is a particularly active nexus of experiential transformation. Blackness, as an attempt to connect with authentic Limonense experience, operates outside the bounds of ethnic legitimacy set up by white Costa Ricans in the Central Valley. In a similar but much less examined way, men, as a dominant group, establish the boundaries of legitimate performance, art, literature, etc.,

which either excludes or greatly constrains women's participation. As a result, women are forced to seek new or at least more flexible forms through which to connect to authentic Limonense experience. Women's creative response to the legitimacy versus authenticity dilemma illustrated in poetry but evident elsewhere, reflects the broader struggle in Limón for cultural authenticity and their own internally constituted legitimacy.

Notes

[1] There has been at least one prominent example of a male poet in Limón. Known as the 'Tailor Poet', Alderman Johnson Roden was a well-known figure in the port city in the early part of this century. His poems, however, were rarely if ever published, and as the height of his literary career was before the civil war, his rare vocation as a male poet might best be contextualised in the tradition of oral narrative that was still popular at that time. There has also been at least one example of a Limonense woman who writes prose fiction. Elena 'Nena' Pardo, a white Costa Rican and retired school administrator, has self-published a collection of short stories as well as her first novel. Her contributions to Costa Rican literature are by no means well known, but she does serve as an important corrective to what might at times appear to be a strict gender division in literary expression. In any event, I would argue her focus on prose literature is the exception that proves the rule, where 'rule' is asserted in its most flexible connotation.

[2] This is a previously unpublished poem I translated from Spanish. The original poem in its entirety can be found in Appendix B.

[3] ibid.

[4] ibid.

[5] ibid.

EPILOGUE

Each evening, just after sundown, the streets of Roosevelt filled with the raspy horn of an old Volkswagen van. As Lindford Johnson and his partner made their way up and down the grid of barrio streets, revving their engine and leaning on the persistent horn, people would drift from their homes to pick through the pan bon, ginger cakes, coconut biscuits, gisada, soda biscuits, salt bread, and whatever else they had laboured over that afternoon in the nearby bakery. Huddled around the windows of the van in the creeping darkness, neighbours, friends and relatives would share news, joke, and offer the usual good natured ribbing that flavours life in any close-knit community. It was leaning on the side of the old khaki van that I first tasted some of what made Limón so complex and so compelling.

It wasn't long until I was criss-crossing the barrios ranging over the subtle hills of Puerto Limón's suburbs searching for more cultural sustenance. I had seen glimpses of it painted on the walls of homes and businesses around town; painted with the same passion that Lindford put in his baking.

'I'm looking for Rommel Spence', I asked the haggard pulperia proprietor or the child playing in a small patch of parched earth.

'Rommel? Yes, yes, just three hundred meters up the road', or 'The black painter? He's just down the way there', came the replies in Spanish, English, or some mix of two.

I found him squatted on the edge of a flimsy chair in the front yard of his mother's

house, his three year old daughter by his side. He was putting the finishing touches on a painting, and after stopping momentarily to make that awkward first connection with a stranger, he relaxed back into the work. We talked for a while about his passions and his fears.

'In San Jose, on that side of the country, they don't have this kind of painting'.

Rommel, seated in the open-air studio of his front porch, squinted thoughtfully at his canvas and absently continued his explanation of stylistic differences in Costa Rican art.

'If you go to Guanacaste you will find something different, Puntarenas, another style, and so on for different provinces'.

The young artist leaned into the painting to add a few more leaves to a mango tree framing several dark-skinned men loading bananas on to a freight train. The clean lines, caricatured faces, and vibrant colours all echoed the style pervasive in Limonense canvas art.

Finally, Rommel leaned back, looked up and said, 'Yes, because the people will surely paint with the vision they see'.

His words 'with the vision they see' seeped into the gaps of my well-ordered ideas about art and aesthetics that carried me to this gritty port town, a forgotten city in the forgotten province of a developing country. Puerto Limón, port Lemon, an apt name for this tough-skinned, bittersweet little city that stung in its first few encounters, but offered a life-saving sustenance to those who drank in enough. I imagined that mythic old grandfather, perched on the front porch of an equally mythic, equally old wood-stilt house painted over and over in the canvas art of local painters. I could almost hear him rasping out the legend of Limón to anyone who would listen.

'There once was a lone lemon tree on the edge of a small natural bay'.

My nameless host spoke with both hands planted firmly on his knees and a broad smile across his face.

'It was a land of few inhabitants; oppressive heat and disease kept all but the most adventurous, and desperate, far away in the mountains. The lemon tree was like salvation to the people of the coast who used its fruit and leaves to fight their infections and Yellow Fever. But it was the only one of its kind in the region and people would come from enormous distances to collect its precious medicine. Soon the tree became the cross-roads for travellers who were told "a half-mile from the lemon tree", or "just down from the lemon tree"'.

His eyes drifted and he laughed a far-off laugh of remembrance. Then he straightened up and looked me in the eye.

'It came as no surprise when men in suits came down from the mountains in 1867 to claim their new port that they called it Puerto Limón, "Port Lemon"'.

I shuddered back from the scene on canvas before me; the scene that had so seductively sucked me in to its crafted little world. I was standing on a street in Cieneguita, that notorious barrio just South of the city, staring at a painting by William Duran. The old man's words still echoed in my mind, mingling with those of William seated next to me.

'The place doesn't matter. What's important is what you are painting'.

William spoke between long drags from his cigarette. He sat in a wire chair perched precariously over the narrow gutter that divided his front stoop from the street.

He thought for a moment, then contradicted himself, 'When a painter begins to work he needs to close himself off from the world. He has the inspiration, then he needs solitude'.

Two neighbours hailed him as they passed and William shouted back. He laughed to himself at their private joke and turned back to me.

'Once he has finished he can return to life. He has to get out of his routine and get inside of his art. There is perhaps more inspiration in solitude than when you have people all around you in the street distracting you'.

William flicked his cigarette to the pavement. It tumbled among the other used stubs where he sets his easel every day. From inside, his wife called him in to lunch, one of his children wailed, and another neighbour hailed him from the street.

Before he heaved himself from the chair he added, 'One needs solitude'.

The wry irony of his last words hung there in the chattering sociability of the street, slowly seeping back into the concrete walls and pavement, all melting under the oppressive, inevitability of the sun's heat.

A three dollar ticket on an occasionally air-conditioned coach provided the only means of escape, carrying me and fifty strangers along that straight and narrow concrete vein between Limón and the Central Valley. Stepping off in San José, the world had transformed; as if skin tone were a function of altitude. I was disoriented, out of place in this startlingly different cityscape.

I sought out some remnant of Limón in the figure of a haggard and time worn novelist. Joaquin Gutierrez lived in a pink house on a quiet stretch of concrete cubes in a suburb of the capital city.

'The problem was that when the UFC came there to plant bananas, the Ticos from

the Central Valley, they don't like Limón'.

Joaquin spoke through a smile with a raspy, broken English.

'So the UFC brought all those Negroes from Panama. Then came the Chinese . . . in Limón there are many Chinese. So when I was a boy my friends were Chinese, Negroes. It was very good to have that diversity of races'.

The ageing novelist, with his tousled shock of stark white hair and perpetual grin, shifted in the small leather chair that unsuccessfully tried to accommodate his rather lengthy frame.

'Yes, my memories of my youth in Limón are very strong. Limón, the life in Limón, is very strong. All the races, the whole world is there. Limón was a wonderful place to spend my youth'.

He thought for a moment, and added, 'Really, it's another country'.

As the return coach dropped down into the sultry warmth of the Atlantic zone, I silently mouthed Joaquin's last words. We had passed a border somewhere along that precipitous descent, the string of volcanoes standing as sentinels at the checkpoint, our passports etched across our skin: tourist, government official, local.

Back in Limón I searched for some counterpoint to Joaquin. I found him in the sagging grandeur of the First Baptist Church rectory.

'I see myself as black, period. I have no problem with that'.

Miguel sat on the edge of his seat across the long table in the church library. His eyes sparkled behind thick glasses as he spoke of his city and its 'identity crisis'.

'But I grew up in the Creole community, Creole culture, so that's what I knew and that's what I'm identified by'.

He relaxed back into his chair, folded his hands across his chest, and continued, 'Now, the culture is a Caribbean culture, and so for a long time we referred to the coast here as the Central American Caribbean Coast. Matter of fact, it is washed by the Caribbean Sea, though our textbooks say the Atlantic'.

The sparkle returned to his eyes and he laughed, 'There might be a reason for that, but . . .'

Miguel remained silent, as if that silence said it all.

I would make more trips between Limón and the Central Valley over the course of twelve months. Partly to make sense of the disparate perspectives found in both, and partly to escape the heat of the former. I realised the power of escape through these travels, a power denied to many Limonenses, a power that would forever mark my ultimate exclusion as a local. I was a traveller in perpetual motion, ever relying on the kindness of strangers to help make sense of the worlds I so easily passed between.

'You see the nice straight streets, wide like that. You don't see nothing like that anywhere else in Costa Rica'.

Darien shifted in his seat as we glided down the highway that connected Limón to the rest of the country. '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 last few barrios of the city blurred past the window of the large bus, and we began to traverse the lush green flatlands of the Atlantic zone.

'The Spanish, they don't know how to build a city, with their narrow little streets. They don't plan ahead'.

Darien continued talking as we passed one town after the next. Soon the highway began the sharp climb into the mountains that would take us through the Zurqui tunnel and into the Central Valley.

'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'.

Darien stared out at the city of San José stretching before us.

'But then the government built the highway, the whites come in, and they f—ked it all up'.

Darien's frustration echoed through the comments of other Limonenses who felt the cultural stability of blackness slowly crumbling under the weight of whiteness. I thought about my conversations with Rommel and William, about their connections to Limón, and about the ubiquitous blackness of their canvases.

Picking my way down the crumbling sidewalks of the city centre teeming with pedestrians, I sought out the artist who started it all.

'All the painters around here are students of mine'.

Negrín spoke with his eyes glued to the busy street just inches away. We sat where he was a permanent fixture of Limón city life, on a narrow strip of concrete sidewalk with his half-finished canvas on the rickety easel to his side and his dilapidated house sagging in the background.

'Yes, there were painters before me, but they did not paint anything like I paint. I am trying to rescue the culture'.

Negrín finally tore his eyes from the fish mongers and the smoky old school busses-cum-public transport and explained, 'It was better in the past. There was more scenery, more culture, more inspirations to paint. Now there are no inspirations. There are cars and highways and the people are of a different sentiment'.

He sagged in his flimsy wire lounge chair, and as his eyes drifted back to the street, said quietly, 'Of course, it's all different. It's all in the past'.

Negrín roused himself to colour the canvas once more, and I watched as the swirling current of modernity that surrounded us crashed into the 'rescued' past of his nostalgic composition. Two worlds collided on that narrow stretch of concrete between the street and the house, and both were broken apart into bits and pieces picked up by passers-by on their way to market, to cook lunch, to comparsa practice, to make love, to live and to die.

These two worlds seemed always to be colliding, and the flotsam of the wreckage floated through conversations and experiences. Like when I met with Danny at his house in Santa Eduviges, that 'safe' barrio perched precariously on a hill just North of the city centre. Danny sat eating his lunch and waxing about years gone by and the days to come.

'So but our parents here, in those - talk'n many years ago - they had a . . .,' Danny thought for a moment. He took another spoonful of arroz con mariscos, and with a sudden recollection spoke through a mouthful of rice and seafood, 'They used to call it a Tumba, they call it now a Conga, but they used to call it a Tumba. And they have the ukulele, they have the guitar, and they have - they used to take the calabash and make a scraper - and they sit there and start to sing calypsos and songs'.

Danny finally swallowed his food and continued to bake in the heat of his suburban patio waiting for the rhythm section of his comparsa band to arrive.

'The music of the comparsa is different. It's born in us. It's a thing that's born in us. You can here it play'n a pan, play'n something. You can have a table here - we hit'n the rhythm and we dance'n after that. 'Cause we feel it'.

Danny forgot about his lunch and leaned forward in his flimsy wire chair.

'We can just sing'n and dance'n at the same time without no music. We make music with our mouth. We take music . . . we, okay . . .' Frustrated with attempts to verbalise his thought, Danny spat out a staccato rhythm. The infectious beat travelled to his hands which tapped out an accompaniment on a small table before him.

He stopped as surreptitiously as he began. '. . . and we start to feel the rhythm. It's something that's in the blood'.

Music in the blood. An image of fluidity but also carnality. Dancing with the spectre of biological determinism without losing that sense of spontaneity bordering on chaos.

Some weeks later I was standing on a street corner watching Danny's comparsa strut passed to the beat of the driving drums. There, in the rhythm section was Rommel Spence, on break from his canvas to rattle out a beat on the snare. Or had he stepped into his canvas – rescuing a sense of blackness as he performed in the streets of Limón the music that inspired that mythic Caribbean-ness of his compositions.

Later, I visited a local art gallery where 'traditional story-telling' was advertised to take place. Within the wooden walls upon which hung the canvases and crafts of local Limonenses, the owner explained how no one asked her to organise such an event. The only words that would careen lyrically around that room would be the poetry of local women. It was then that I began to see the threads of expression coming together. Artists

as musicians and poets as artists all performing in the space they have claimed as their own.

One of my last trips to the Central Valley was to visit Eulalia Bernard, the poet of the people of Limón. Somehow it was fitting that she should have the last word in the cacophony of competing perspectives on Limón where the views women often remained curiously, at times powerfully, unspoken.

'I think I am very much the memory and the voice of the people of the Limón'.

Eulalia lounged regally in her armchair. The walls of the tiny room were drenched with tapestries, carvings, canvasses, and literary accolades. All collided in a visual richness that conveyed an air of royalty over which she presided with a presence that outshone the props.

'I am like Octavio Paz', she continued, 'I think poetry is the memory of the people. Novels are fine, but they are just novels. Poetry is more honest, more to the point'.

Eulalia leaned forward for the first time, preparing me for her next statement.

'I am the voice of the people, and a memory of the people, but not only of Limón. I see Limón as part of the universe. First as the universe in general, but also the geographical universe, the African diaspora and the diaspora of the working class'.

Eulalia paused for a moment, allowing her words to guild the atmosphere already pregnant with significance.

'I couldn't have written what I have written if I had stuck to writing about Limón. And it could not have influenced as it has from Africa right down to Limón'.

In that moment, Eulalia Bernard was Limón, all women, and Africa.

The Problem with Words

Clifford Geertz, in describing the analysis of common sense as a cultural system, writes: 'one cannot do so by cataloguing its content, which is wildly heterogeneous . . . by sketching out some logical structure it always takes, for there is none . . . by summing up the substantive conclusions it always draws, for there are, too, none of those. One has to proceed instead by the peculiar detour of evoking its generally recognised tone and temper, the untravelled side-road that leads through constructing metaphorical predicates . . . to remind people of what they already know' (Geertz 1983:92). This highlights some of the problems with writing about aesthetics. It is difficult to speak about it directly as it is understood through experience. To mediate that experience with words is to reify and, ultimately, destroy the object of analysis; an act tantamount to dissecting the songbird to discover the source of its lyrical beauty.

The preceding extended narrative is my feeble attempt to re-animate the setting I have so carefully, and with the best intentions, dissected over the course of the thesis. Of course, as Shelly's Dr. Frankenstein discovered, re-animation is a dicey proposition. For my narrative is itself an act of creative practice, based upon but removed from the flow of lived experience, hoping at best to construct a wieldy metaphor to communicate the Limón aesthetic to outsiders, and, if I have done my job well, to remind Limonenses of what they already know.

The problem with words is not limited to ethnographic writing. Limonenses themselves move in and out of conscious articulation of their particular orientation to the issue of identity. It is a complex and largely ambiguous concept that develops according to its own rhythm, regardless, and perhaps in spite of, overt attempts to control or direct

it. This is due in part to the fact that identity is rarely neatly collective; it is more often fragmented and differentially located at various levels among various groups. It is also due to the transformative influence of experience always responding to, and challenging, the ideals of self-identification. This thesis has sought to amplify the often spontaneous rhythm of identity formation in Puerto Limón by elucidating the transformative influence of experience and the fragmented nature of self-identification through the analysis of an aesthetic system.

The at times not-so-subtle alternate agenda has been to flesh out the potential for a specific anthropology of aesthetics. This project has met with several difficulties, not the least of which is the problematic categorisation of expressive forms. This problem comes down, again, to the limitations of ethnographic writing, and future work on aesthetics, without the constraints of a doctoral thesis, would do well to address this issue. Other anthropologists, and no doubt my own future research, will seek new ways to effectively communicate the integrated nature of aesthetic systems in various other contexts.

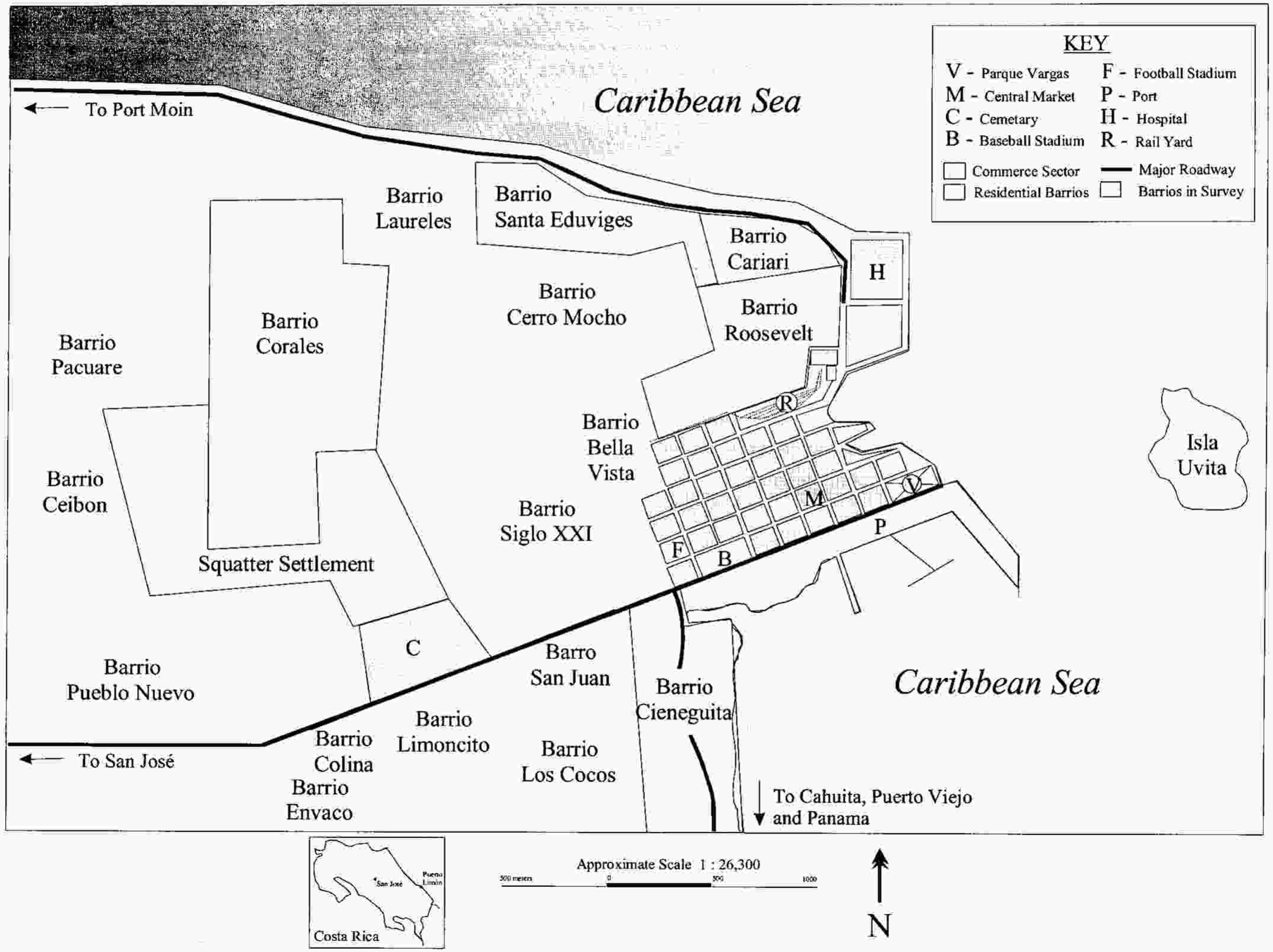
The problem with words will remain the challenge of an anthropology of aesthetics, perhaps its most difficult challenge, despite the red herrings of 'methodological philistinism' and the critique of judgement. I have endeavoured to show it is worth meeting the challenge, that an anthropological approach to aesthetics reveals aspects of social processes left untouched by more traditional theoretical positions. As Howard Morphy argues, 'the search for the explanation of form enables a work of art to be used as an independent key to unlocking particular socio-cultural processes, disclosing structures and connections of which the anthropologist moth otherwise be unaware' (Morphy 1996:662). Morphy's emphasis on *how* rather than *what* art means moves away

from the fetishisation of objects toward an anthropology of aesthetics, which, according to Jeremy Coote, 'may help us to understand what we might otherwise seek to explain with reference to social structure, cosmology, symbolism, etc.' (Coote 1992:269).

Sorting through the cultural aesthetic of Puerto Limón revealed a dialectic between ideology and phenomenology that reverberated through constructions of race, ethnicity, gender and nationalism, coalescing into an image of identity as contingent and flexible without losing the organising sensibility of blackness; the 'changing same' of Paul Gilroy's *Black Atlantic*. This was the intention of the thesis, and, indeed, the result only underscores the process described: we are left with an image, fleshed out in the preceding pages, to which experience must respond in the ongoing, cross-cultural process of value attachment, defined here as an aesthetic system.

Appendix A:
Statistical Survey

Puerto Limón – Barrios in Survey



Survey Questions

1.Barrio: 2.Number in household:

3.Kinship structure
[Que son las relaciones entre las personas? Hermanos, primos, abuelos?]

4.Occupations:

5.Racial composition:

6.Language spoken in the home:

7.Household members born in Limon:
[Cuantos personas de las casa nacieron en Limon?]

8.Origin of non-native household members:
[De donde vienen las personas que no nacio aqui en Limon?]

9.Generation which first settled Limon:
[Cual generacion de su familia vinieron a Limon para la primera vez?]

10.Origin of first settlers:
[De donde vinieron?]

11.Location of family outside Limon:
[Uds. tienen familia afuera de Limon? Donde?]

12.Given the means, would you relocate: 13.Where:
[Si podria movear afuera de Limon, harialo? A donde?]

14.House construction type:

15.Rent or Own:

16.Most recent remodeling:
[Nunca arreglan este casa? Cuando?]

17.Most popular household living space:
[Cual lugar adentro es el mas popular de su familia para pasar tiempo?]

18.Television: 19.Cable:
[Tienen uds. un television? Y cable?]

20.Family music preference:
[Que tipo de musica escucha la familia mas frecuentemente?]

21.Can you tell me which barrios are mainly Afro-caribeno:
[Cual de los Barrios de Limon tiene mas de los Afri-Caribenos?]

22.Which barrios are safe:
[Cual de los Barrios son mas seguros y tranquilos?]

23.Which Barrios are dangerous:
[Cual de los Barrios son mas peligroso?]

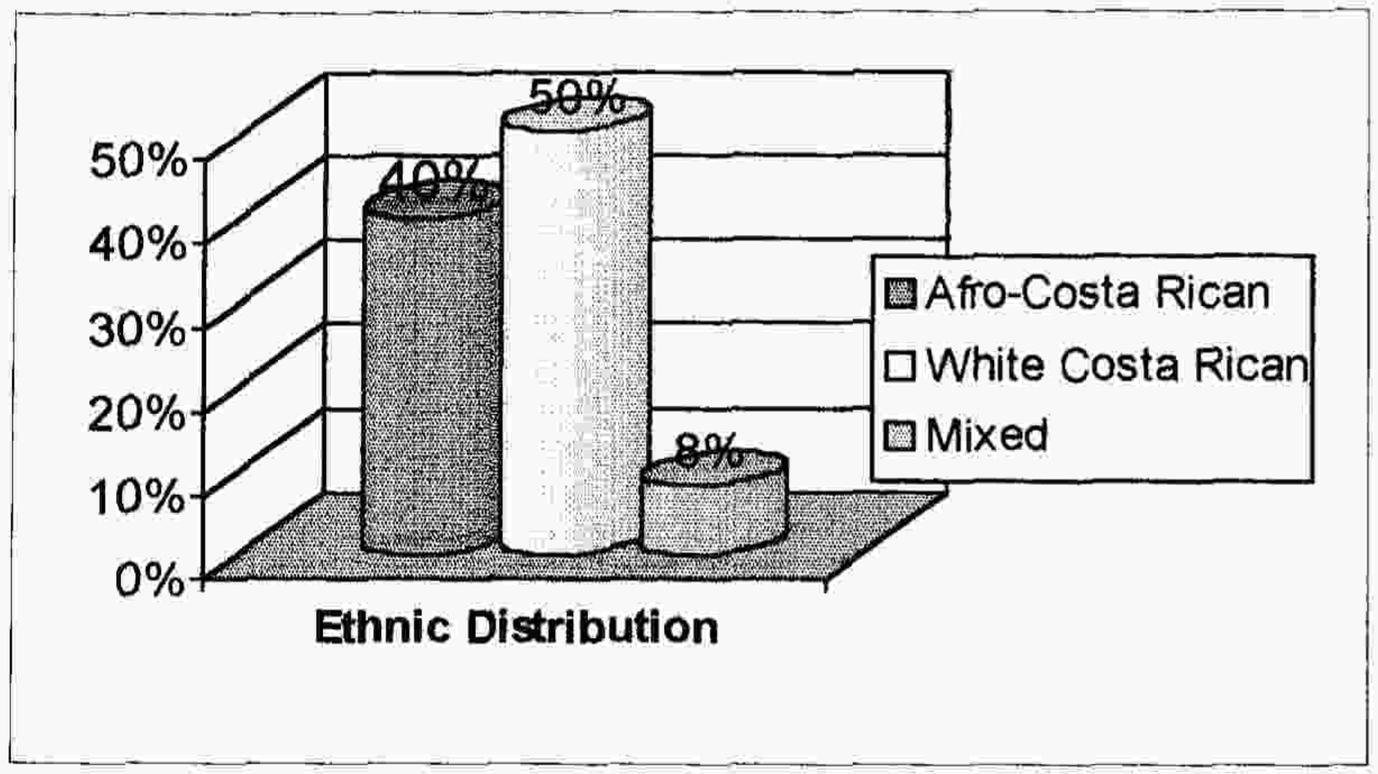
Overall Totals

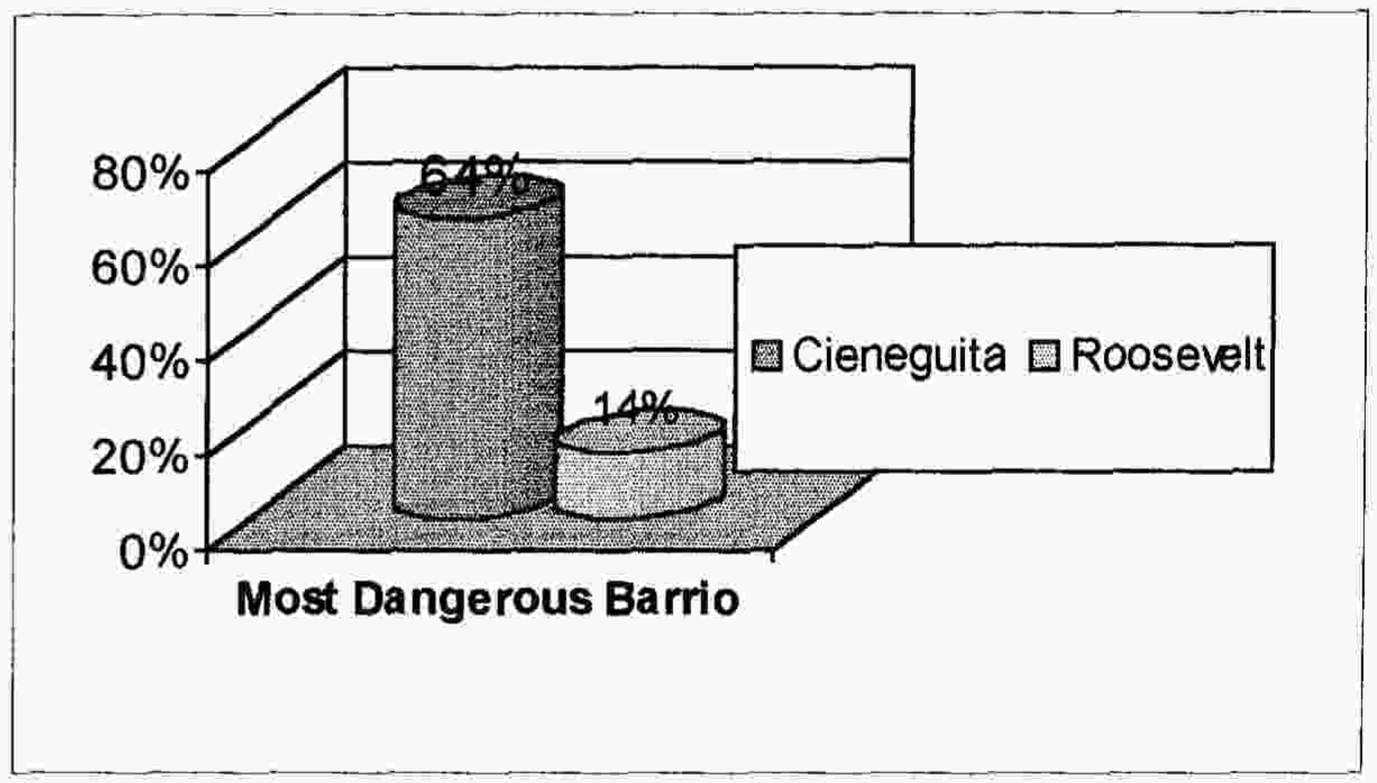
Statistical Category	*Barrio Roosevelt*	*Barrio Corales*	*Squatter Settlement*	*Barrio Cieneguita*	*Barrio St Eduviges*	*Totals*
Avg. # per HH	3.6 (180/50)	4.56 (228/50)	5.92 (296/50)	4.44 (222/50)	4.28 (214/50)	4.56 (1140/250)
% AC HH	66%	42%	14%	40%	36%	40% (99/250)
% WC HH	16%	46%	80%	42%	52%	47% (118/250)
% Mixed HH	16%	10%	6%	18%	12%	12% (31/250)
% Mix Marr w/AC male	75%	100%	50%	33%	60%	70%
% Mix Marr w/AC female	25%	0%	50%	66%	40%	30%
% "Married" HH	56%	66%	80%	56%	74%	66% (166/250)
% Born in Limon	85%	80%	55%	83%	76%	75%
% Marriages Both Native	50%	45%	25%	50%	49%	43%
% Marr w/Non-native Male	13%	30%	70%	43%	46%	40%
% Marr w/Non-native Female	38%	39%	68%	36%	41%	44%
% Concrete Dwelling	64%	66%	4%	72%	64%	52%
% Wood Dwelling	36%	6%	76%	26%	36%	36%
% Ricolit Dwelling	0%	28%	20%	2%	0%	12%
% Owned Dwelling	62%	98%	NA	84%	78%	80%
% Rented Dwelling	38%	2%	NA	16%	22%	20%*
Most Popular HH Space	Sala	Out in front	Sala	Out in front	Out in front	Out in front(45%)
2nd Most Popular Space	Out in Front	Sala	Out in front	Sala	Sala	Sala(33%)
% HH w/TV	100%	98%	84%	86%	100%	93%
% HH w/Cable	52%	2%	NA	NA	36%	18%
Most Popular Music	Carib=Latin	Romantic=Latin	Latin	No Pref.	No Pref.	Latin(25%)
2nd Most Popular Music	Religious	No Pref.	Religious	Religious	Romantic	eligious=Romantic(20%)
% HH w/Family in US	82%	72%	36%	68%	46%	60%
% HH w/Family in SJ	72%	80%	66%	80%	76%	74%
% HH w/Family in Carib.	24%	0%	0%	0%	4%	5%
% HH English Speaking	50%	28%	16%	20%	18%	26%
% HH Spanish Speaking	36%	62%	84%	56%	66%	60%
% HH Spanish=English	14%	10%	0%	24%	16%	13%
Most AC Barrio	Roosevelt	All Mixed	Roosevelt	Mixed	All Mixed	All Mixed(39%)
2nd Most AC Barrio	Cieneguita	Roosevelt	All Mixed	Roosevelt	Roosevelt	Roosevelt(35%)
Safest Barrio	Roosevelt	Corales	Corales	All	St Eduviges	Corales(23%)

Overall Totals

Statistical Category	*Barrio Roosevelt*	*Barrio Corales*	*Squatter Settlement*	*Barrio Cieneguita*	*Barrio St Eduviges*	*Totals*
2nd Safest Barrio	None	Siglo 21	All	None	NA	St Eduviges(22%)
Most Dangerous Barrio	Cieneguita	Cieneguita	Cieneguita	All	Cieneguita	Cieneguita(64%)
2nd Most Dangerous	Roosevelt	Roosevelt	Roosevelt	Cieneguita	Roosevelt=Limoncito	Roosevelt(14%)
% HH Desiring Relocation	30%	46%	44%	36%	26%	36%
% HH Desiring Reloc to SJ	40%	16%	6%	8%	2%	14%
% HH Desiring Reloc to US	27%	12%	10%	12%	8%	13%
% HH Desiring Reloc to Cari	7%	0%	0%	2%	0%	1%

* Squatter Settlement Not Included





Appendix B:
Unpublished Limonense Poetry

Limón
By Vera Beatriz

Yo amo Limón
Ácida fruta deliciosa
Joya deslumbrante y preciosa
Amo Limón porque aquí dí mis
Primeros pasos,
Descrubrí las vibrantes sensaciones,
Me hice mujer, tuve mis hijos,
Y cual hija pródiga luego de mar-
charme por un tiempo regresé,
Llena de amor por mi pueblo,
Sufrido y a la vez
Único y majestuoso,
Amo Limón por su mar,
De un azul centellante y a veces
Rugiente y delirante,
Por su verde, en todas las gamas,
Rico y pródigo;
Por sus negros, raza orgullosa y
Valiente, que nos hace diferente
Y a la vez muy especiales,
Bellas mujeres, cual diosas,
Elegantes y airosas princesas,
Que lo traen en la sangre
Muy arraigado,
Los hombres, algunos son reyes
Desde sus orígenes y lo continúan
Siendo.
Limón, mezcla de razas y colores
Y de exóticos olores de diferentes
Sabores a las doce en su cocina.
Limón, música y flores,
Sol bullicio y colores,
Alegres en carnaval
El tam, tam, tam de los tambores,
El aullar de caracoles,
Nos invitan a cantar, a bailar,
A soñar, a soñar . . .

A Una Madre
By Vera Beatriz

HOY HE VISTO
EL INMENSO DOLOR
EL DOLOR LACERANTE QUE SIENTE
UNA MADRE POR SUS HIJOS.
ES EL DOLOR QUE PARALIZA
QUE DESTROZA.
POBRE MUJER MADRE.
MADRE ETERNA.
HASTA EL FINAL
TO DOLOR ES EL DE TODAS LAS MADRES
CUANDO VEN QUE PIERDAN A UN HIJO.
SU HIJO, SU HIJITO . . .
EL LINDO BEBE QUE AMAMANTARON
CON LA DULCE LECHE DE SUS TETAS
CON EL DULCE ARRULLO DE SU PECHO,
ACUANDO CONTRA SU CORAZON,
Y MADRE LOS HIJOS CUANDO CRECEN
YA NO SON DE UNA,
COGEN SU CAMINO
LABRAN SU DESTINO
Y EN ESE MOMENTO
NADA PUEDES
HACER, SI EQUIVOCA EL RUMBO
SOLAMENTE ORAR.
Y ENCOMENDARLOS A DIOS
QUE NOS HIZO MADRES
PARA ASI AYUDARLO
A GUIAR LA HUMANIDAD
MUJER, MADRE. MADRE.
HASTA EL FINAL.

No Debo Ninguna Disculpa
By Prudence Bellamy

No debo ninguna disculpa
porque mi piel es negra
no debo ninguna disculpa
porque mi piel brilla
como el terciopelo.

No debo ninguna disculpa
porque sobre mis espaldas
cayeron latigos
mientras laboraba
en las plantaciones.

Tampoco debo ninguna disculpa
porque
por el don divino
de mi fuerza fisica
contribui al desarollo
socio-economico
de tantas naciones del mundo.

Pero si de todo corazon
quiero disculpar
a todos aquellos, quienes
por su sed de ser amos
me usaron y me maltrataron

Porque a pesar de todo
Soy Poesia,
Soy Ritmo,
Soy Cancion,
Soy un Ser Humano
Quien ama a sus hermanos.

Limón
By Prudence Bellamy

Es donde el blanco
Prefiere vivir en la playa y en la selva.
Es donde el coolee
Prefiere vivir en Westfalia.
Es donde el indio
Prefiere vivir en los valles y en las montanas.
Es donde el negro y el mestizo
Prefiere vivir en los barrio y zonas rurales.
Es donde el chino
Prefiere vivir en la ciudad.
Limón
Es donde todos vivimos juntos
Porque
Limón vive en el corazon de
Cada unos de nosotros.

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