

Summary Report: Black cultural exchange and identity formations in Costa Rica

Nicole Ramsey M.A

African American & African Diaspora Studies

What does it mean to be Black in Central America? This particular question that guides my work has always been one of confusion, miseducation, and struggle. In recent years, an increase in scholarship on blackness in Latin America and the Caribbean has worked to situate the Black Diaspora in regions and places that have not always been represented. Although work on Afro-Latinx identities and blackness in Latin America have gained traction in digital circles, Afro-Caribbean and West Indian convergences in Central American complicates conceptions of what it means to be an African descendant in places like Costa Rica. For my project on Blackness, identity formation and cultural production, Costa Rica piqued my interest for various reasons: one of which involves its complex dealings with blackness and national identity. In utilizing interpretations of blackness, transnationalism and migration as my entry point, I sought out how constant negotiations of identity among West Indian and Creole populations illuminate how they grapple with history, citizenship and national identity within this region.

The first couple of days in Costa Rica were spent in the Capital, San Jose. I made it a point to see as much sights, both historic and modern, as I could. Although I intended to carry out my project in Limón province, San Jose unexpectedly taught me much about how non-black populations in the mainland engage with African descendants in the region. I was told that the majority of Black people you would find in San Jose are indeed from the coast or somewhere else in the region, because being a black person from anywhere other than the Caribbean coast is hard to grasp for some. On my first full day exploring the Capital I visited the National Theatre and was amazed by its preservation and lavish design. On my way to the mezzanine level to explore more of these architectural designs I became intrigued by a ceiling mural that depicted a dark skin (presumably Afro) man carrying bananas. After discussing this observation with the tour guide I concluded that this was indeed a mural depicting Limón and the Caribbean Coast. So much could be said about the image, from the way the man was dressed and holding the bananas (public debates reveal that because the artist was not from the country and not familiar with life on the coast, the afro-Caribbean man was holding the banana bunch incorrectly), to the interesting lighter-skinned, white-euro depiction of the female coffee growers was enough to establish the role that the Coast as well as Black West Indian laborers held in the public Costa Rican imagination. Reducing the black presence to this image further proved that the State's relationship to Blackness is indeed still a complex and intricate one.



Ceiling painting known as the *Alegoría al Café y al Banano* (Photo by Nicole Denise Ramsey)

My trip coincided with Limón's black history celebrations in August. The month of August boasts a 30-day celebration of Afro-Costa Rican history, culture and traditions---culminating in a large street parade celebration on the last day of the month. Dia de la Negra, a fairly recent tradition pays homage to the history and culture of Costa Rica's black population. Blackness in Costa Rica, specifically in Limón Province and has a long and complex history involving the African slave trade (circa the Caribbean) and utilization of West Indian/Afro-Caribbean labor from Jamaica and neighboring countries in the region like Nicaragua, Panama, and Belize. Given that the majority of Costa Ricans lived in "highland" communities away from the coast, Limon has in many ways been characterized as a uniquely foreign and black space, especially when taken into consideration the historic presence of banana plantations, American merchants and imported black laborers from the Caribbean. Although West Indians were not the first group of African descent in the country, their heavy presence sheds light on conceptions of identity, heritage and culture.

My conversations with significant figures in the Limon community was a demonstration of how language has now become a site of both contestation and cultural pride. Given the (familial and cultural) relationship of Limonese residents to the first West Indian laborers, English and the practice of speaking English is the lens through which Afro-costa Ricans gage both history and authenticity. This struggle is often seen generationally—as youth generations (Pre-K through Secondary school) are seen as the main culprits in these discussions. Multiple elders in Limón argue that language is the most important issue facing the Afro-Costa Rican community. English is closely tied to black identity—given that this was the main language of their Caribbean parents, grandparents and great-grandparents. Many have relegated this "misuse" of language in connection to an identity crisis among black youth. Laura Hall, one of my subjects and coordinators of the Central American Black Organization (CABO), when asked if she identified with an Afro-Latino or Afro-Costa Rican identity replied that she primarily

identifies as an African descendant in Central America. She explained that in order to identify as Latino, you would have to be clear about the boundaries of Latin America itself. Given Limón's place within the greater Caribbean, Laura's analysis of Latin America and identity is far from incorrect and most importantly raises new questions about both Caribbean and Central American regional identities. Hermelinda McKenzie, Librarian of the Limón public library agreed that identity is indeed tied to language.¹ She also made an indictment about the Costa Rican educational system by stating that the easiest way to "kill off a Black people" was/is through language.

The response to this revelation has also been positive. Kendall K-Jah Cayasso, Youth leader and member of Limón based Reggae- Calypso band, *Di Gud Frenz*, uses Calypso music to bridge the gap between these identities. In performing Reggae and Calypso music, the band is part of a larger movement to identify and connect with an ancestral Afro-Caribbean history and culture that has been present on the Coast for centuries. The majority of songs are sung in patois or Limónese creole which in part represents how Afro-Costa Ricans see themselves and their place within the Greater Caribbean culture. Kendall's observation about Calypso and how it is becoming integrated within Costa Rica's "folk music" (although most of the instructors do not have ties to the Caribbean) has pushed me to think about Latino and Afro-Caribbean or West Indian identities tangentially. Surprisingly, youth in Limón listen to mostly Dancehall music, a popular form originated from the island of Jamaica. They identify with the words spoken in patois and creole—Spanish youth residing in Limón who do not necessarily identify with a black identity have begun to embrace this musical form in much more different ways.



Di Gud Frenz, performing at Emancipation Day (August 1st) celebration at the Public Library in Limón. (Photo courtesy of Di Gud Frenz band page)

At the center of black life in Limón is Liberty Hall on Calle 5. Built in 1922, this building served as the headquarters of the Universal Negro Improvement Association founded by Marcus Mosiah

¹ It is also important to note here that our entire conversation was spoken in creole, in her case, Jamaican patois.

Garvey. Garvey's arrival in Limón in 1910 as a labor organizer had a profoundly deep effect on the culture and lived experience of black descendants on the coast. Liberty Hall. UNIA Building is one of the few branches still present today—unfortunately the building caught fire and burned down earlier this year. Although plans to rebuild have not been as swift, the overall spirit of the black community has not faltered. They are still successful in holding workshops for the youth and working closely with state administrators in addressing particular issues affecting black residents. President of the UNIA 300 Branch, Winston Norman Scott, is part of this culture of mobilization and preservation among black descendants in Limón. Winston's ties to the Caribbean are also apparent, his grandparents hail from Jamaica. Along with Kendall, and Laura, Winston has taken multiple trips to the Capital to meet with some of the country's leaders.

In 2015 the United Nations declared 2015-2024 the international decade for people of African Descent. The declaration was geared towards addressing some of the racial, economic, and social injustices that African descendants throughout the world (and mostly the Americas) face. According to the website, some of the objectives include seeking out recognition, justice, development as well as addressing discrimination (in all forms) at both the regional and international levels.² In response to this inaction by the Costa Rican state, community leaders (including Laura, Kendall, and Winston) are working on a video campaign with Limón residents in addressing how both systemic and everyday articulations of racism affect them in various ways.

Although I came into this project wanting to learn out how Afro-Costa Ricans negotiate their place in Costa Rican society through cultural production, I learned a great deal more about what an Afro-Costa Rican identity really means to people on the ground. Most importantly, how histories of labor, Caribbean migration, culture and language impact how one might even begin to engage with an Afro-Latino and Black Central American identity. Learning about the legacy of slavery (although absent from Costa Rican narratives) and regional blackness has encouraged me to ask new questions about my topic. Not only is it important to know how Afro-Costa Ricans perform conceptualizations of blackness, but really delving into what that blackness means to them in a transnational context and within a country that prides itself on whiteness.

References:

Harpelle, Ronald N. *The West Indians Of Costa Rica. [Electronic Resource]: Race, Class, And The Integration of an Ethnic Minority.* n.p.: Montreal; Ithaca: McGill-Queen's University Press, c2001., 2001.

Purcell, Trevor W. *Banana Fallout: Class, Color, And Culture Among West Indians In Costa Rica.* n.p.: Los Angeles: Center for Afro-American Studies, University of California, Los Angeles, 1993.,

² <http://www.un.org/en/events/africandescentdecade/plan-action.shtml>