

Rethinking Race, Gender and Citizenship: Black West Indian Women in Costa Rica, c. 1920–1940

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This article brings Afro-Caribbean women to the fore of a discussion of Costa Rican citizenship. It explores the relationship between ideologies of gender, imageries of black womanhood, and the dialectic of citizenship and exclusion. It examines how the efforts of the black elite to achieve citizenship through assimilation generated inter-class tension which centred on ideas of female morality. It explores the absence of political platforms for poor black women excluded by such strategies and argues that while Costa Rican feminists succeeded in challenging the ideological system of gender they failed to challenge issues of race and class.

Keywords: Afro-Caribbeans, citizenship, class, community, Costa Rica, gender.

Race and gender are themes which have been virtually absent from historical discussions of Costa Rican citizenship. The black population of Limón province on the Atlantic Coast has been largely excluded from Costa Rican historiography, due to racism and regionalism compounded by the tendency to work within the paradigm of Costa Rican 'exceptionalism'. Work undertaken on Afro-Costa Ricans has focused largely on the West Indian community as a migrant labour population imported by foreign multi-national corporations (Bourgeois, 1989; Chomsky, 1996). The subsequent emphasis on the relationship of the West Indian community with the United Fruit Company (UFCO) has left little scope for analysing the black community's interaction with the dominant Hispanic society. There have been recent efforts to fill this gap in the literature, notably Ronald Harpelle (2001) who has explored the efforts of the West Indian elite to acquire Costa Rican citizenship and become assimilated into Costa Rican society through the adoption of an Afro-Costa Rican identity.

However, despite renewed efforts to bind together the themes of race and class in an analysis of social stratification and social mobility, both women and gender continue to

be excluded from the debate.¹ This article seeks to redress that imbalance and return Afro-Caribbean women to the fore of the discussion. It will be asserted here that the imagery and ideology of gender, more specifically of black womanhood, are central to an understanding of the dialectic of citizenship and exclusion as regards the West Indian community. Divided into two sections, the article will begin by exploring how the efforts of the West Indian elite to achieve citizenship through assimilation were undermined by class tensions within the black community and how these efforts crystallised around gendered ideas of femininity, domesticity and respectability. The second part deals with the consequences of these ideas and images for the lower-class black women who fell outside projected norms of 'respectability,' and thus lacked all rights associated with citizenship or community membership. I underline the absence of a political voice for this group, and explore the processes by which other marginalised groups, white women and black Garveyites, who could potentially have provided a platform for black women, mobilised around single categories of race *or* gender and thus failed to represent the needs of black women.

The term West Indian 'community' which is so central to this article is used primarily in a descriptive manner, as another term for social group. Black West Indians and their descendants formed a distinct social and cultural group on the Atlantic Coast. Afro-Caribbean cultural norms were recreated, such that Limón appeared almost as an outpost of Jamaica, with English the dominant language, Protestantism the major religion, and Carnival, cricket and dominoes all transported. Moreover, Afro-Caribbeans actively closed themselves off to Hispanic influences, considering themselves culturally and morally 'superior' to Spanish-speaking Costa Ricans. Community as defined here refers to membership in this social collectivity. However, it is important to note that the community also had a political dimension, with a self-imposed elite drawn from the urban upper-middle classes dominating the West Indian media and acting as informal mediators between the Costa Rican authorities and the black masses. The authority they exerted was largely economic and professional, emanating from wealth acquired through entrepreneurial activities and land speculation, and from their positions as teachers, doctors, and churchmen, and was asserted through control of the local media. The distinction between the urban, professional elite, and the land-owning peasants they claimed to represent mirrored at community level divisions of class, gender and ethnicity found in national collectivities.

This fragmentation is particularly significant in relation to questions of citizenship discussed here. In recent years, advances in the study of citizenship have led to more complex analyses of social divisions and positionings within national collectivities where differentiated access to civil, political and social citizenship rights has increasingly

1 Women have been almost entirely excluded from histories of the West Indian community in Costa Rica, with scholars claiming that they were too few in number to appear with any regularity in available source material. Yet women were present in the banana communities: although men were preferred by recruiters for manual labour in the fields, women were brought over by the UFCO to serve as domestics and to work in the Company kitchens and stores. Other women arrived independently with their partners or, later, came to take up teaching opportunities in the schools.

become a central issue (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1992; Pateman, 1988; Turner, 1993; Walby, 1994). In particular, greater efforts have been made to understand the ways in which gender is mediated through, and simultaneously serves as a mediator of, indicators of ethnicity and class, or as McClintock has termed it, the 'triangulated' relationship between these categories (McClintock, 1995: 5). In Costa Rica tensions surrounding the issue of citizenship were refracted through race, class and gender to a striking degree. Black West Indians did not achieve citizenship until 1949, when a new Constitution issued in the aftermath of the 1948 Civil War declared full citizenship rights for everyone born in Costa Rica, this being in part a response to the participation of blacks in the war on the side of José Figueres.

The issue of citizenship in the case of West Indian blacks was complicated for it involved not just the right to vote but also recognition of their permanent residence and desire for status as Costa Rican nationals. Previously citizenship had been denied to blacks because of the circumstances surrounding their arrival in the country. By importing black or Chinese immigrant workers the UFCO was violating legislation (passed in 1862); but national authorities turned a blind eye on the assumption that this migration was temporary. Initially, this assumption was shared by black workers, who continued to view themselves as British subjects and to look to the British authorities to protect their interests. From the 1920s the situation began to change. In the aftermath of a series of disastrous crop failures, the UFCO decided to alter the organisation of production and increasingly entrust banana growing to smallholders under contract to the Company. As a result, West Indian settlers gained access to land, relishing the opportunity to embark on a form of 'peasant adaptation', a well-known feature of post-emancipation Caribbean societies. The acquisition of smallholdings, combined with preferential employment opportunities in semi-skilled and supervisory positions within the UFCO, coupled with the out-migration of the poorest working class cohort of the West Indian labour force meant that the black population of Limón as a whole achieved significant upward social mobility. By the 1920s, they constituted a large middle class in the banana zone and this generated a shift in their political perspective. As land-holders, many Afro-Caribbeans now paid taxes to the municipal government and it began to rankle that despite their compliance with these civic duties and responsibilities, and long-standing residence in the country, black West Indians were not considered nationals and were thus denied the benefits of citizenship. Of growing concern was the fact that second- and third- generation migrants were effectively left without a nationality as both the Costa Rican government and the islands of their parent's origin were reluctant to register them. But rather than resorting to political pressure and struggle, the second-generation elite imagined that citizenship could best be achieved through gradual assimilation and the adoption of an Afro-Costa Rican (as opposed to Jamaican) identity (Harpelle, 2001: xvi).

This was taking place during a period of heightened racism, linked to a new expression of nationalism that resulted from economic depression and growing migration of Hispanic Costa Ricans to the Atlantic Coast. It was manifested in the imposition of segregationist policies in Limón, renegotiation of UFCO contracts to include employment quotas favouring Costa Rican nationals, and increased government intervention in black community institutions. All of this made the West Indian community's

status on the coast more vulnerable. Yet black community leaders made little effort to retaliate against these attacks on their community. Understanding themselves now to be included within the nation as land owners and small farmers, they sought to convince black people to become Costa Rican citizens (Harpelle, 1992: 182). They came to believe that their struggle for inclusion was held back not on account of the racism of the national authorities but by the failure of certain sectors of the black population to conform to the moral standards set by the Costa Rican nation.

That inter-class tension should crystallise around the issue of citizenship is highly significant. Anthropological studies of social stratification among Afro-Caribbeans in Limón have shown that social mobility has been associated with integration into mainstream Hispanic society (Bryce-LaPorte and Purcell, 1985; Purcell, 1993). This accords with analyses of plantation societies elsewhere in the West Indies which have shown that the emergence of intra-ethnic divisions among blacks were dictated by the dialectic of domination. As such, they are rooted in colonial hierarchies of skin colour and culture and inevitably pressure towards cultural assimilation. Central to this article is the assertion that these intra-ethnic divisions were also highly gendered and played out through the manipulation of representations of female morality. Norms of respectability focused on gender-roles and the family. Consequently an essentially white, middle-class femininity centred on motherhood, the home and 'sexual purity' was projected as the ideal for black womanhood. Class status within the West Indian community in Limón was thus symbolised by women and their family and this hinged on the control of female sexuality.

The use of women to symbolise class boundaries has been recognised in a wide range of societies and is now something of a received wisdom within feminist theory. Yet it has never been taken into consideration by scholars analysing the social and political developments in Limón, even though it is evident from anthropological studies, oral testimonies and the *Autobiografías Campesinas*² that the maintenance of social norms rested unequally on women. Middle-class families aspired unambiguously towards the norms of 'traditional' femininity, and nowhere is this clearer than in the socialisation of girls. Girls were expected to excel at sewing, cooking and the musical arts; tomboys were punished and ideas of sexual virtue sternly imposed on young girls. Middle-class families were rigidly careful about the mannerisms, attire, language, sexual liaisons and social networks of their daughters, since girls perceived to have broken the rules of sexual conduct could severely damage family respectability. In their autobiographies, women recalled beatings from their mothers for fishing in creeks with boys, riding with them on horseback and scrumping mangoes, while one woman revealed how she 'cried like never before' after her first sexual encounter, convinced

2 In an effort to find out more about the lives of rural people, the National University of Costa Rica held a competition in the 1970s inviting people from all over the country to submit their autobiographies, a selection of which were published in a five-volume book. A 35-volume collection of the original transcripts, divided according to region and gender, is housed in the UNCR library, and the single volume devoted to women from Limón provides an insight into the childhoods of West Indian women brought up between 1900 and 1940, and sheds a fascinating light on the moral standards inculcated by sectors of the black community.

that her mother would read what had happened in her face.³ Such testimony highlights the fact that these values were esteemed and enforced by women and reinforced by society at large. The family was consistently presented in the media as integral to a woman's identity and epitome of feminine success. Obituaries in the West Indian press stressed women's achievements as mothers almost to the exclusion of any successes in the workplace or in the community at large, while the congratulatory notices posted for women who had graduated with diplomas in nursing or teaching from colleges in San José and Jamaica were far out-shadowed by the exuberant reviews of their weddings.

The middle-class emphasis on this form of femininity cannot be viewed simply as a male imposition. Women were its upholders as much as its objects and this should not be dismissed as an indication of false consciousness. In Costa Rica, as elsewhere in Latin America and the Caribbean, the dominant discourse used black women's bodies as a vehicle for the presentation of Africans as primitive, animal-like and savage; black female sexuality was presented as primal and available. Across the Americas, elite black women reconstructed and represented their sexuality through its absence and pleaded the cause of virtue and the pure principals of morality in order to combat negative images and stereotypes (Collins, 1990: 4). In adopting patriarchal ideals of female virtue, though, black women believed they could advance the more general cause of black ascent.

In an analysis of African-American women in the US, Darlene Clarke Hine (1994) shows how black women's adherence to an essentially Victorian ideology of domesticity and self-representation as 'super-moral' was fuelled by a belief that this would not only lead to the protection and upward mobility of black middle-class women, but also to the attainment of respect, justice and opportunity for all African-Americans. Such considerations informed the actions of black West Indians in Costa Rica. However, black elites – both male and female – failed to realise that projections of their own respectability would have no impact on the racial ideology of white society if representations of black lower class immorality were allowed to persist. Rather than challenging such projections, the West Indian elite drew on the highly gendered language and imagery set out in the dominant discourse as they increasingly differentiated themselves from the black lower class in their own struggle for citizenship.

Religious Revivalism, Lunacy and Poor Black Women: Intra-Ethnic Conflict and the Struggle for Citizenship

The black lower class came under increased attack from community leaders during the 1930s, and it was poor, black women who were brought progressively to the fore as scapegoats for all community failings. Lower-class black women did not meet with elite norms of respectability: they were economically obliged to work and the matrifocal family networks they formed to prevent social disintegration and preserve cultural cohesion in the face of conjugal instability were perceived to violate the ideal of the

3 *Autobiografías Campesinas*, Unpublished Transcripts, Volume 24.

nuclear family. Certainly the West Indian press was keen to put the blame for family instability on black women. Reports of violent conjugal breakdown generally inferred female 'promiscuity' and infidelity to be the root of the problem. This stood in contrast to the almost daily abandonment notices featured in the same newspapers in which men announced to the community that 'my wife ... having left my protection from this day, I no longer take responsibility for her, nor for any debt she may incur.'⁴

Cases of wife murder were alarmingly common where female infidelity was usually pinpointed as the cause, with the result that such cases were reported with an abject lack of sympathy. The message relayed was that while the act itself should not be condoned, the woman had only herself to blame for abandoning her husband and taking a lover. Moral judgements extended to attacks on women in their capacity as mothers. One report lamented the murdered wife's failure to consider the implications of her promiscuity on her children: 'Would that mothers could but reflect on the consequences of their good or evil lives must have on their daughters prospects particularly.'⁵ Rather than register concern for the life-chances of the now motherless child, the main disquiet seems to have been that the 'immorality' leading to this woman's death could be passed on by example from one generation of women to the next. Taking a similar line, an article in the newspaper, the *Atlantic Voice*, explicitly targeted black mothers – as opposed to racism, unemployment and economic decline – as the cause of youth delinquency in Limón. In an article entitled 'To the Coloured Mothers of Limón', black women were condemned for 'not exercising the real responsibility you have in your hands. We have a class of children in this community of whom the grown-ups are afraid.'⁶

Class and gender, then, were clearly intertwined in elite West Indian representations of the black lower class. For the dominant Hispanic society race and gender were likewise inter-linked, and racist attacks were invariably gendered and centred on black morality. This was as true of popular discourse as that of the elite. A petition presented to the National Assembly in 1933 by 543 white farmers from Limón insisted that: 'It is impossible for us to coexist with them because their customs don't admit it. For them neither the family nor the honour of women exist, and they live in disgraceful promiscuity which puts in danger our families founded in accord with religious precepts and good Costa Rican customs.'⁷ On a number of key issues the West Indian elite and Hispanic community used markedly similar language and imagery in stigmatising and attacking black lower class behaviour. This is well illustrated by reactions to religious revivalism and lunacy in the black community in the 1930s.

An outburst of Pocomania, an Afro-Jamaican possession cult, was a black lower class response to social and racial oppression experienced under the administration of

4 These notices persisted right through foote's period of study, from 1904 to 1940. All were worded along similar lines to the example given here.

5 *Limón Times*, 1 August 1932.

6 *The Atlantic Voice*, 24 January 1940. The pathologisation of the black matriarchal family is a perpetual theme in the representation of black women, and still a factor in black women's oppression today.

7 *Archivo Nacional de Costa Rica, Serie Congreso*, No. 16753.

President Leon Cortés (1936–1940).⁸ Both West Indian and Costa Rican elites reacted with horror to Pocomania which was characterised as ‘vile, immoral and evil’ and as ‘devil worship under the guise of religion’.⁹ The Costa Rican and West Indian press made continuous efforts to discredit and undermine religious revivalism by misrepresenting the behaviour of its participants. Since women were prevalent in these cults – often as leaders¹⁰ – the manipulation was often highly gendered and focused on the ‘immorality’ of women cult members. Female worshippers were described as dancing ‘naked from the waist up’, smoking marijuana and engaging in scandalous sexual behaviour with minors as part of their rituals. Participants were also accused of desecrating graves, dealing in body parts and kidnapping children, and women were accused of offering their own children up for sacrifice.¹¹ Harpelle has drawn attention to the class tension inherent in the accusations levelled by the West Indian press where Pocomania and obeah were seen as threatening elite efforts to make the West Indian community conform to European ideals. Leaders said they were ashamed that a minority was responsible for drawing attention to the wrong aspects of West Indian culture (Harpelle, 2001: 117–119).

The mediation of class tension through gender became even more apparent in the discourse surrounding ‘lunacy’ in the black population. Both West Indian elites and Costa Rican authorities became convinced that the high level of dementia amongst the West Indian population was caused by participation in religious cults. In reality, it seems that rather than a greater prevalence of insanity, the community was facing increasing poverty and destitution; now many beggars were being labelled as mentally afflicted. The Costa Rican government insisted that the growing numbers of ‘demented foreigners’ posed such a severe threat to social peace that a systematic programme to expel all ‘destitute and mentally afflicted coloured people’ resident in Limón was warranted (Harpelle, 2001: 101). The Governor of Limón compiled a list of over 50 individuals who were considered to be ‘too dangerous’ to be moving freely in Costa Rica, which was presented to the British Consulate with the request that these

8 Ronald Harpelle has discussed this issue at length, drawing parallels between the resurgence of religious revivalism and millenarist movements in other parts of the world generated by economic trauma (Harpelle, 2001: 103–119).

9 The Atlantic Voice, 15 May 1937.

10 The most notorious sect leader was Sheperd Altimore Dabney, who was deported in 1937 after a police and media campaign of persecution against the group lasting more than a year. Interviews in the Jamaican newspaper, *The Daily Gleaner*, with the five women deported to Jamaica for their involvement in the sect led by Dabney reveal that the notorious Tabernacle had in fact been formed by a woman, Eliza Henry, and that it was only after her death that Dabney took over as leader. Descriptions of the Dabney sect at the time of the police campaign against him also clearly state that Dabney was equalled in status within the cult by a woman known as ‘Mother of the Troupe’: both were apparently worshiped as gods by their followers. As the hysteria surrounding religious revivalism grew, more and more groups were named by the press as Pocomania cults: at least three of these were headed by women. This is consistent with patterns of worship in Jamaica, where women occupy important leadership roles in African-derived sects.

11 *Diario de Costa Rica*, 20 September 1936; *The Daily Gleaner*, January 15 1937; *The Atlantic Voice*, 15 May 1937; *La Voz del Atlantico*, April 12 1939.

'undesirables' be returned to Jamaica. Most on the list were not criminals but simply incapable of caring for themselves; more than half of them were women. The scheme failed, for the Jamaican government refused to accept responsibility for second-generation West Indians. By 1937, none of those whom the government wanted to expel had been repatriated. Two alternative solutions of key significance to women's social situation were then proposed.

First, although the British Consul refused to aid repatriation, he did intervene in the case of women on the list. He asked the UFCO to 'come to the rescue' by granting 'old, sick, indigent women' free passage to Jamaica as a charitable gesture in recognition of their long years of domestic service for the company. The UFCO agreed and the *Atlantic Voice* congratulated General Manager Chittenden for 'ridding the community of the sight of much distress'.¹² This was not the first occasion that such an intervention had been made by the British Consulate on behalf of black women. The problem of lunacy among West Indians had plagued relations between Costa Rica and the British Colonies since the earliest years of West Indian migration, but British concern had only ever extended to insane women. Thus in 1908, the Vice-Consul had applied for permission to repatriate to Jamaica two women imprisoned in Limón for insanity, while no attempt was made to relieve the analogous plight of three men imprisoned for the same offence.¹³ Only women could be presented as acceptable recipients of charity, demonstrating that British norms of feminine frailty and vulnerability to suffering could indeed be extended to black women but only when they were in such obvious distress as to override conventional stereotypes of black female 'hardness' and self-sufficiency.

Secondly, continued agitation for a more far-reaching solution led the government to investigate the possibility of sterilising incurably insane women: a definitively gendered solution to the problem. Remarkably, this idea was supported and propagated by male leaders of the black community. The *Atlantic Voice*, which considered itself to be in the forefront of attempts to 'uplift the Negro race',¹⁴ considered sterilisation 'the only effective method of stemming the evil in society'.¹⁵ In an unsettling editorial the paper argued in favour of the sterilisation of 'the offspring of germ-infested, diseased parents, who must not only drag out their own weary existence, but who ... constitute a dangerous menace to public health'.¹⁶ Here sterilisation was proposed not just for the clinically insane but for all working-class women. In other words, it was a solution not just to the problem of lunacy but a curative for the embarrassment posed to the West Indian elite by the existence of lower class blacks. Some influential Costa Ricans advocated sterilising the entire community to prevent the spread of African blood, equated as it was with savagery and degeneracy and a threat to the 'whiteness' which was constructed as the national genetic and cultural identity.¹⁷ The threat presented by African savagery could only be controlled through

12 *The Atlantic Voice*, 22 May 1937.

13 Cox to FO, 2 May 1908, in FO 369/126/17662.

14 Newspaper motto.

15 *The Atlantic Voice*, 12 November 1938.

16 *Ibid.* Also cited in Harpelle, 1992: 208.

17 ANCR, *Serie Congreso*, No. 15, 400.

curtailing black sexuality. That the black elite shared these negative interpretations of African-ness is clear from its persecution of African-derived religions and from its efforts to present indigence in the community as the result of lunacy stemming from these practices. This was taken to such extremes that carried away by class superiority, the black male elite lent support to a eugenicist project which if successful, threatened to eradicate the entire black community.

Clearly the attitude of the black elite reflected a profound breakdown of communication and trust within the community. That this breakdown in inter-class cohesion was refracted through gender is vital to an understanding of its dynamics. What is particularly interesting is the internal conflict between pressures of race and class in this gendered process. Women were used by the black elite via the projection of an idealised 'traditional' femininity both to symbolise class differences on the basis of 'respectability' or 'suitability' and to indicate class solidarity or parity across racial lines. This failed because for the dominant Hispanic society the issue of race subsumed all else. They were not able to perceive class differences within the black community because for them, the crux of the matter was the black presence itself. Of greatest concern for the Hispanic population was the preservation of ethnic homogeneity within the nation; their attitudes towards the dangers of assimilation would be little affected by the 'propriety' of black behaviour. In targeting and shaming poor black women for their apparent 'failure' to conform to European norms, the black elite paradoxically conspired to undermine their own efforts to achieve group respectability. When using the same gendered imagery as the racist dominant society in their condemnation of the black lower class, West Indian leaders failed to defend the community from racist attacks and they lost the opportunity to renegotiate the racial ideology which defined their oppression. They were thus unable to challenge their own status as its victims.

This can be seen as evidence of the success of the dominant white discourse in obscuring race and propagating the idea that class, not race, was the key indicator of social status and social mobility. The West Indian elite had, in effect, been caught between two conflicting versions of national ideology. At one level, national identity was indeed based on egalitarianism and the celebration of the small farmer and took pride in the elevated levels of democracy found in Costa Rica during a period of democratic expansion. The franchise was being extended, partly on account of the activities of socialist, labour and feminist movements that were pushing for the incorporation of groups on the margins. Yet underlying the 'egalitarianism' of Costa Rican national identity was a conception of ethnic homogeneity, more specifically of whiteness. Many features of this national identity, such as democratic values and political stability, widespread land-ownership, literacy, an elevated appreciation of 'culture' and the arts, were attributed to the country's Euro-American racial composition. As late as the 1940s, anthropologists John Biesanz and Mavis Biesanz (1944: 33) were repeatedly told by informants: 'We are one of the whitest nations; we have progressed because we are not bothered by inferior races'. In contrast to other Latin America countries, and despite the elaboration of a more inclusive Costa Rican nationalism in the 1920s and 1930s, blacks continued to be labelled as outsiders.

A Political Voice Denied

If the consequences of this mismatched manipulation of class, race, gender and citizenship for the black community as a whole were unpalatable, it was black working women who suffered the most negative reverberations. Poor black women were pathologised and denied access to the myths of female morality. Since racism and classism were thought to be carried through their bodies they were considered to share neither the virtues nor the vulnerabilities of other women. Denied access to the rights associated with either citizenship or community membership, black women were subject to abuse and discrimination in every aspect of their daily lives. Sexual abuse was a constant menace. The *Autobiografías Campesinas* highlight a common pattern of black female domestics forced to leave jobs because of sexual harassment by employers, while those who found no escape were repeatedly beaten and raped. In Foreign and Colonial Office files, West Indian men repeatedly complained of their wives and companions being 'ill-used' (presumably raped) by police, while there are also occasional testimonies from the female victims themselves.¹⁸ The British Legation took no interest in such complaints. In responding to rape allegations, the British Consul consistently invoked the women's 'extremely low' social status and emphasised the 'immoral' nature of their family arrangements, the implication being that race, class and gender made poor black women 'unworthy' of his interventions. Black women also lacked legal rights. Law court records and newspaper articles suggest that gender, skin colour and status prejudiced black women's chances when testifying, making them vulnerable to false accusation and imprisonment. Legal discrimination was compounded by linguistic disadvantage, since few were fluent in Spanish. Black women faced particular difficulties in asserting their property rights due to patterns of family formation. In cases where a deceased partner had not left a will, proof of legal marriage was a woman's only hope of claiming access to her partner's estate, and few among the West Indian lower class either left wills or had married. Even when they possessed land titles themselves, black women were still vulnerable to disenfranchisement, as highlighted by court cases in which women's lands were seized by creditors to pay off debts.

The limited possibilities open to poor black women for achieving redress or justice were compounded by their marginalisation from pertinent political movements. Black, indigenous and feminist activists have been vociferous in recent years in drawing attention to the manner in which ethnic minority women in Latin America historically have been denied a political voice – an exclusion continuing to the present day. The dual nature of black female political exclusion has been increasingly recognised as resulting from the way the nation state was constructed through the ascription and reification of ideas of race, refracted through manipulations of gendered imagery (Radcliffe and Westwood, 1993). This meant that even when one oppressed group struggled for position, the critique of their exclusion replicated orthodox patterns of prioritisation and hierarchy. In other words, black movements continued to ignore the specific needs of

18 Important case studies can be found in Young to FO, February 29 1916, FO371/2643, and Mallet to McAdam, February 17 1919, CO318/350/19715.

women; while women's movements failed to perceive the particular problems of blacks. This took an exemplary form in early twentieth century Costa Rica.

Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) represents a prime example of the way black social and political activism denied women a specific voice despite their disproportionate participation. Although women made up the vast majority of participants in the Limón branch of the UNIA, the nature of their involvement was defined by gender. All of the women's branches operated within notably feminine fields. The Ladies Auxiliary was put in charge of cultural programmes, ran schools and organised social programmes, such as providing meals for the poor, sick and elderly. Black Cross nurses provided care for the sick, while the Girl Guides provided for the moral upliftment of girls. Women organised entertainment programmes such as plays and concerts and they organised youth groups. Such activities should not be dismissed. Garvey himself possessed an acute awareness of the role of culture as a tool for liberation and encouraged experimentation in the arts for the purpose of politicising the UNIA membership (Martin, 1976: 24). But women never held top leadership positions; in fact, the presence of a Ladies Auxiliary may have served to institutionalise the marginalisation of women from real decision-making power, as the existence of a Lady President, Lady Vice-President, and so on, meant that women were effectively corralled into dealing only with 'women's issues'. The big political issues of the day affecting the future and status of the community, such as labour strikes, negotiations with the Costa Rican government, or even the visit of the ship, *Fredrick Douglas* of the Black Star Line, were reserved for men.

Women's marginalisation was reflected within the UNIA at the international level¹⁹ and was symptomatic of the way in which women were perceived and represented by the male UNIA hierarchy. While the Garveyist movement was concerned to 'uplift' women, this was to be achieved through sponsorship of beauty contests and greater emphasis on black female beauty. Tony Martin (1976: 23) inadvertently gets to the crux of the issue when pointing out that such efforts were 'designed to bolster the black *man's* self-esteem, and to bolster pride in the self' (author's added emphasis). For women, their bodies continued to be objectified for male gratification.

The contradictions this implied can be seen at work within the Garvey movement in Limón. UNIA membership cards from the 1920s testify to the male-bias inherent in their aims. 'The UNIA and African Communities (Imperial) League, an organisation embracing the millions of men, women and children of Negro blood and African descent of all the countries of the world, striving for FREEDOM, MANHOOD and NATIONALISM of the Negro, and to hand down to posterity a FLAG OF EMPIRE ...'²⁰ The black nation was specifically envisaged as a male nation, with black men demanding the

19 Although a handful of women did exercise important roles in the UNIA international hierarchy, women who achieved influential positions did so in a manner consistent with the idea of women exercising a cleansing, moralising influence on politics. Henrietta Vinton Davis, Mme de la Mena and Mrs Mitte Maude Lena Gordon were all involved in mediation and peace-keeping activities, underlining how political activity was defined by gender norms.

20 Cover of UNIA membership card, from personal correspondence with contemporary activist.

opportunity to provide for and protect their women in a manner analogous to white men. A more far-reaching vision of equality was never entertained. While in speeches and editorials leading Garveyists recognised that women suffered a double layer of discrimination, the black solidarity called for as a solution was intended to ensure that 'We as Negroes can protect our women and our children's children.'²¹ Once again, women were being conceived by men as tools for their own social ascension.

There were parallels with respect to the Costa Rican feminist movement. Just as men were conditioned by the constraints of the dominant discourse into seeing race as the key oppressor, so hegemonic nationalism shaped feminist thinking on race. Angela Acuña, the first female lawyer in Costa Rica and founder of the *Liga Feminista*, explicitly conceptualised her struggle for rights as being on behalf of women of 'la raza latina'.²² Back in 1912 this could be justified in that black West Indians were perceived as purely temporary migrants. But the links between a 'Latin race' and the nation stuck. Even when second-generation West Indians emerged as a potential constituency, so definitively did Acuña's vision of Costa Rica crystallise around 'the Latin race' that even her crowning work, a two-volume history published in 1969 documenting in immaculate detail the lives and works of an exhaustive sweep of women, contains no mention of black women. Not even Limón's Carnival Queen is mentioned in her chapter on 'Women and Fiestas' (Acuña, 1969).

Working class and socialist feminists who did not have a stake in the liberal nationalist project were more likely to give some consideration to black women. But the communists were the only political party to appeal to West Indian blacks as a potential constituency, albeit with very limited success. Significantly, Carmen Lyra, one of the founders of the Costa Rican Communist Party and undoubtedly the most important left-wing female activist, did pay attention to the problems of black people in the banana zone.²³ In her '*Llamamiento a las Mujeres de la Clase Trabajadora*' of 1936, a polemic against capitalism, Lyra emphasised in visceral language how the basis of capitalism was slavery and how Africa had been ravaged as a result (Lyra, 1977: 460). Her recognition of black oppression, though, was limited to forging solidarity in accordance with the imperatives of 'unity in the struggle'. There is little indication in her writings of a deeper concern with the realities of black women's experience; instead black women of the banana zone were described in stereotypical terms that were reactionary, if not explicitly racist.

The larger political context within which feminist activists formed and articulated their thoughts and opinions influenced not only their political attitudes, but also the strategies they employed in their struggles. During the 1920s and 1930s, the *Liga Feminista*, seeking to appease and gently cajole male politicians into granting women the vote, put forward a series of proposals that restricted female franchise. A bill forwarded in 1931 by the League proposed an amendment to the Constitution

21 The Atlantic Voice, 27 April 1936.

22 Angela Acuña, 'Conferencia' in *Cordelia* 1912.

23 Labour leaders and trade unions were keen to recruit West Indians during the 1930s, a major period of Communist-inspired militancy in the Zone; however, the change in social positioning resulting from black upward mobility and the vulnerability engendered by the growth of racialised nationalism virtually precluded black participation.

granting the right to vote to university graduates, teachers, typist secretaries, accountants, nurses, women who had graduated from elementary school and spoke one foreign language, women who had graduated from private schools, women who spoke two or more foreign languages, and finally, women who owned land or property (Barahona Riera, 1994: 106–107). A subsequent bill of 1934 removed those who had graduated from private school from the list. Such a tactic was politically astute as an anti-feminist stand could no longer revolve around women's lack of education or lack of capacity. While the restricted franchise did not explicitly exclude black women, the underlying aim was clear: to endorse the vote only for Latin race women of a certain status. As Angela Acuña insisted in an article in *La Nueva Prensa*: 'Costa Rica has a large number of outstanding women. Denial of their political rights constitutes a violation of the principles of justice. The vote is for those of us who deserve it' (Sharrat, 1994: 76). In her efforts to fit into a discourse set by men, Acuña was endorsing a classist and racist proposal. Black feminists have lamented the failure of mainstream women's history to acknowledge the racist and imperialist attitudes of early suffragist and feminist movements (Carby, 1982: 222). This has been part of a wider critique alluding to 'racism in the feminist movement' (Collins, 1990). The case of Costa Rica highlights the extent to which exclusion was far more than a matter of the prejudices of elite white women. It was not only the feminist movement which failed to include black women, it was every political party. While the Reform Party and the labour movement began to include women and the working class during the 1920s and 1930s as a way to expand the grassroots base of their movements, black people had still not been considered a valid constituency; in this period of racist nationalism they were not even recognised as Costa Ricans. While some intellectuals and progressive liberal politicians came out in favour of female suffrage, such as Roberto Brenés Mesen, Pedro Pérez Zeledon and Jorgé Voilío, they saw no connection with black suffrage: it was not considered an analogous question. The exclusion of the black population reflects the way in which the racism of national mythology permeated every aspect of the political system; 'whiteness' dictated the parameters within which all political negotiation was framed. Thus reformist groups, such as feminists negotiating for greater inclusion in the national project, were pressed to remain within these racialised boundaries. In effect, white Costa Rican women were forced to prove their suitability for citizenship by fitting into a pre-existing political framework which had been moulded by the dominant racist-nationalist discourse.²⁴ Thus although feminists challenged the ideological

24 This was true even in terms of gender. As Eugénia Rodríguez has shown, Costa Rican feminists largely gave their support to the liberal effort to construct a hegemonic national project, seeking to redefine the roles and relations of gender in accordance with traditional gender norms, notably through their consistent emphasis on sexual difference and the traditional feminine roles of motherhood and the education of children (Rodríguez, 2000: 186). This pattern was repeated all over Latin America, and allowed early feminists to have some impact in a hostile environment. However, by failing to challenge the wider hegemonic system, and operating within the relations of racism and class oppression, first wave feminists were generally able to achieve gains only for an elite group of women.

system of gender, with regards to issues of race and class they plotted their struggles firmly within the constructions of the hegemonic liberal state.

It is unlikely that black women were deeply concerned by their de facto exclusion from the feminist movement. Women in Limón received little information about the suffragist movement. While the early West Indian press reported – in very disparaging terms – on the English suffrage movement, the Costa Rican women’s movement was almost never mentioned in the newspapers, this being a reflection of the fact that news from Britain was always prioritised over that from San José. When news of the women’s movement did filter through, it was presented as ‘bad’ and ‘unnatural’, if not entirely laughable. Moreover, women’s education did not have the same radicalising effect on West Indian women as it did on those from San José, where the Colegio de Señoritas is widely perceived as the ‘birth-place’ of Costa Rican feminism. Upwardly mobile black women concerned themselves with achieving respectability instead of sexual equality. This was seen as a more viable manner of augmenting social rights.

Concluding Remarks

A female-focused perspective on the citizenship struggles of the black elite in early twentieth century Limón sheds new light on the complex relationship between class, gender and respectability in West Indian efforts to achieve political inclusion. It also highlights the dangers of assuming the ‘black community’ to be a coherent, undivided entity and demonstrates the way in which community membership was determined by moral qualifications refracted through norms of class and gender, which in turn were shaped by the ideals of the dominant society. The relationship between dominant and subordinate groups within national society is further underlined by the absence of political options open to black women, which points up how the positioning of oppressed and marginalised groups within the national framework affected the political strategies employed to overcome the restrictions placed on them, and thus served to perpetuate the political marginalisation of black women. Most importantly it illustrates the extremely negative reverberations at the level of lived experience for poor, black women, who found themselves left outside the boundaries of either citizenship or community, subject to the triple oppression of race, class and gender, and with no political options open to them to challenge their exclusion. Despite winning the vote in 1948, it was not until the 1970s when second-wave feminism began to make its mark in the region that black women in Limón were able to take the struggle for their rights into their own hands.

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