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Carving Caribbean spaces in between: The Life of Ruth Gourzong in 20th Century Puerto Limon, Costa Rica

By Natasha Gordon-Chipembere¹

Abstract

This paper attempts to make visible the community and their descendants of free Jamaican blacks who immigrated into the Atlantic Coast of Costa Rica (specifically Puerto Limon) at the turn of the twentieth century to help build the American owned Northern Railway and work on the banana plantations owned by the American owned United Fruit Company. I illustrate the life of my great grandmother, Ruth Gourzong as an example of a woman from this community who managed to thrive against the odds of racism and sexism during her life time in Costa Rica. In order to fully appreciate the context of Afro-Costa Rican lives, it is important to first recognize the presence and legacy of Africans who helped build colonial Costa Rica from the 16th century onwards. On many levels, their lives have been rendered invisible as they have “melled” into the “Hispanic” pot of Costa Rican-ness. With the 2014 impetus by Costa Rican President, Luis Guillermo Solis to recognize the legacy of Afro-descended people in the country, my work answers this challenge by attempting to bridge two trajectories of African-descended people and their encounter with Costa Rica in both the 16th and 20th centuries. I want to rupture staid ideas about Costa Rica’s “pure” Spanish lineage, which brings to the conversation the legacies of African descent peoples as well as AmerIndian/Indigenous communities who continue to infuse Costa Rica with their rich cultural production. The stories of the Afro-Costa Rican community (in the diaspora of New York to the neighborhoods of Puerto Limon, Cahuita and Puerto Viejo) testify to complex migrations, community, identity, ritual and pride that bridge both a Caribbean sensibility with a Costa Rican national pride.

Keywords: Afro-Costa Rican Community, free Jamaican blacks, history Costa-Rica

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Mrs. Ruth Grant Young de Gourzong. (Photo courtesy of Natasha Gordon-Chipembere, Costa Rica)

Introduction

My mother is Costa Rican from Puerto Limon (via Jamaica) and my father is from Panama (via Jamaica). Though I was born in New York, my relationship with Costa Rica has been life-long. For this reason, I write about the life and legacy of my great-grandmother, Ruth Grant Young de Gourzong, a Jamaican immigrant and the family matriarch who established firm roots in Puerto Limon at the turn of the 20th century. I highlight Ruth because she is seemingly an anomaly in the paradigm of racial and gender segregation which was par for the course in Puerto Limon during her lifetime. She is an important lens into appreciating the complexity of this community as her story offers an insider view on narratives of agency, perseverance, courage and negotiation that framed many of the life choices of people in Limon, yet theirs are stories rarely heard. The first part of this work frames the Costa Rica which 20th century immigrant West Indians encountered, including my family. It is unlikely that they perceived or estimated what they were coming to when they looked across the seas for work and better economic lives. In the second part of this work, I am most interested in thinking about my great grandmother, Ruth, by observing the strategies she used to actualize her dreams and strivings for her family living in Puerto Limon and abroad. Hers was not a nostalgic narrative of looking back, in fact she hardly, if ever, spoke about her family in Jamaica; rather, hers is a story of moving forward and generating resources to ensure a path for generations to come. To this day, my family's motto is that everything we do now should be in consideration for six generations in the future.

My research in Costa Rica has shown evidence of two separate histories from people of African descent on this land; yet, they are not in historical or contemporary conversation with each other. The Costa Rica which 20th century immigrant West Indians encountered already had a troubled relationship with Blackness. Obscured in their history was an African presence which had already been in Costa Rica for over three hundred years. The national mythology downplayed the presence of slavery in Costa Rica by insisting that the *few* Africans and Indigenous people who were present in colonial times eventually mixed into the general Hispanic population. Thereby, evidence of an African socio-cultural and economic legacy was swallowed in a quest for Spanish exceptionalism reinforced through national narratives of whiteness. In many ways, the act of rendering invisible an African-descended population in Costa Rica from colonial times gave way to a mindset which promoted a non-ethnic, mono-cultural sensibility that would play itself out at the formation of the nation and specifically in its dealings with the people we now know as Afro-Costa Ricans. For 21st century Afro-Costa Ricans and their generations to understand and claim a larger and longer birthright to this country is critical in rupturing many staid ideas about Costa Rica's "pure" Spanish lineage.

My family, among many others, came from immigrant Jamaican blacks who arrived on the Atlantic Coast of Costa Rica (specifically Puerto Limon) at the turn of the twentieth century to help build the Northern Railway and work on the banana plantations for the American-owned United Fruit Company (UFC). Their lives, and thus their stories, have been muted by law and history:

The national government of Costa Rica considered the largely black workforce on the [Caribbean] coast as "foreign" and temporary labor. By 1935, the majority of people of African descent born in Costa Rica were stateless. The Blacks in Limon, prior to the Civil War of 1948 were not fully integrated into the ... country.²

I come from three generations of these women and men who survived as employees of the UFC. What they helped foster, with their Limonese creole," English and hard turned tongues forcing Spanish, was a complex, diverse community that was mostly British Jamaican³ and authentically Caribbean in a Spanish Costa Rica which had in place unspoken demarcations that limited Black movement into the "white" highlands. When they arrived in Limon, they faced a nation where by 1921, the Secretary General for La Sociedad Economica de Amigos del Pais, M.A Zumbabdo stated, "West Indians were prone to crime and their presence in the country threatened to mongrelize the white race... Therefore, the Costa Rican government must stop all further immigration of people of African descent and sterilize all those already in the country."⁴

Imagine the irony of this statement when the vast majority of Hispanic Costa Ricans had been venerating for over two hundred years a Black Madonna, lovingly called "La Negrita⁵," who by 1824 was the patron saint of the country! The icon of La Negrita is a 20-centimeter, dark colored statue of a mother and child that has been attributed to the Virgin Mary and baby Jesus. According

² Dorothy Mosby, *Place, Language, and Identity in Afro-Costa Rican Literature* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 15-16.

³ Note that though Jamaicans made up the large majority of immigrants to Puerto Limon at the turn of the 20th century, many other Caribbean islands were represented including but not exclusive to, Barbados and St. Thomas,

⁴ Ronald Harpelle, *the West Indians of Costa Rica: Race, Class, and the Integration of an Ethnic Minority* (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 2001), 69.

⁵ The Little Black One.

to Costa Rican national folklore, the icon appeared to a woman of African descent on the outskirts of Cartago, the colonial capital around 1635:

In the area that is today, “Los Pardos: there lived a simple woman. Upon a rock, near a spring, this humble mulata encountered the extraordinary image. In her home, she put it in a box and returned to collecting sticks. A second time, the same amazing sculpture appeared upon the rock. This repetition did not concern her: she took the image thinking that there were two of the same. But the holy Queen was having fun with this simple soul because the woman came near the rock again she encountered the same apparition for the third time. Afraid and unsure, she went to the box and did not find the other images except for the one she was carrying. She ran to the priest and explained her case. After hearing the story, the priest put the image in a chest. But the image disappeared from there as well, and for a fourth time she was found in a field upon the same rock by the priest and the same woman. From there she was returned and placed in the Tabernacle. [The next day], she was not there. Resolved, the parish priest and congregation went to the rock, where they found her once again... A thatched roof was built over the rock where her Sanctuary was constructed.⁶

Ken Lohse’s Master’s thesis on La Negrita, *Slaves of the Virgin*, documents with clarity the narrative of how the icon takes on both cultural and aesthetic value in Costa Rica. Through a 189-year process, the La Negrita has been “whitened,” thereby removing her from any relationship with Africa. Russel Sharman comments on the respective timeline of the icon, which spans from, “La Negrita’s appearance to a mulata girl in the 1630s, to her appropriation by white elites in Cartago in 1782, her adoption as national patroness in 1824, and her contemporary adoration [as La Virgen de Los Angeles] and disassociation with colonial slavery.”⁷

Colonial Cartago, Costa Rica

It is stated that there were Africans who accompanied Christopher Columbus on his journey to the Caribbean coast in 1502. With the establishment of the colonial capital in Cartago, slavery was firmly in place by 1563. In relation to other slave systems in the New World, Costa Rica’s version was unique because it did not maintain a mono-crop or plantation economy. With the estimated 10,000 people of African descent in colonial Costa Rica during its 260 year existence, slavery could be defined as more of an intimate, domestic servitude, where at times the lines blurred between the status of freedom and enslavement. Most people of African descent worked in three distinct areas: on the cacao plantations in Matina on the Caribbean coast, which saw its peak between 1690 and 1740, the cattle ranches of Nicoya on the Pacific, and as domestic servants in Cartago. By the 17th century, free Blacks served as part of the militia in protecting the country’s coastal borders.

Cartago in the 17th century had an African population of about 20% (both free and enslaved). As a way for the Catholic Church to maintain a hold on this population, its labor and

⁶ Miguel Bonilla, *La Virgen de Los Angeles*, In *Historia de Nuestra Señora de Los Angeles*, ed. Victor Sanabria Martinez (San Jose: Editorial Costa Rica, 1985), 127-129.

⁷ Russel Leigh Sharman, “Re/Making La Negrita: Culture and an Aesthetic System in Costa Rica,” in *American Anthropologist* 108, no. 4 (2006): 842.

probable miscegenation, they designated a settlement outside of the capital called *La Puebla de los Pardos*⁸, for free people of African descent. The Catholic Church established numerous “Cruz de Caravacas”⁹ to demarcate the lines between “black” and “white” life in colonial Costa Rica. These crosses made clear the limits of where black lives could exist. Similar forms of geographic segregation were replicated across the country in the 20th century when “Hispanic” Costa Ricans engaged with Blackness once again.



The only remaining Cruz de Caravaca in Costa Rica, which delineated the line between de los Pardos and Colonial Cartago (Photo courtesy of Natasha Gordon-Chipembere, 11/2014, Costa Rica)

In 1826, Miguel Bonilla, a colonial Cartago priest, documented the “official” narrative of the apparition of the icon where he fixes the date as 1635. However, the veneration of La Negrita was limited to a handful of local Black residents, when the Bishop, on August 2, 1650, established

⁸ *Pardo* was the generic name used by Spaniards to demarcate free Blacks. Puebla de los Pardos was a township for free black, mulatos and indigenous people on the outskirts of the colonial capital.

⁹ The only remaining Cruz de Caravaca, which the colonial Catholic Church used to demarcate “black” and “white” living areas, is now a National Memorial Site as of September 14, 2014. It is in the area former known Puebla de Los Pardos in Cartago.

La Cofradia, “The Brotherhood,” a Black lay organization charged with maintaining and promoting the worship of La Negrita. The Catholic Church felt “devotion to the Virgen de los Angeles something only blacks could be interested in.”¹⁰ For over 200 years devotion to La Negrita was reserved for people of African descent. Once the Church made her into the nation’s patron saint, the production of meaning outside of African spirituality became a method to subdue and control African descended populations.

I argue that the Costa Rican Catholic Church understood the power of African spirituality and thus appropriated this icon of “La Negrita” into a symbol of Costa Rican nationalism. By the end of slavery in 1824, the Catholic Church began to promote the cult of the Virgin de Los Angeles (La Negrita) and nationalism as one. All official narratives that associated La Negrita with a slave past or African religious sensibility were eradicated in an attempt to move the “white” nation forward as an independent country. The icon of La Negrita, “is [now] fully disassociated with questions of race and remade in the image of the rural working class.”¹¹ Housed in the magnificent Basilica of Cartago and honored by an annual pilgrimage where millions of devout Costa Ricans crawl the final steps to the Church in prayer, La Negrita is associated with her ability to heal, not with African origins.

Negated were the richer meanings attributed to ancient African spirituality clearly understood, acknowledged and maintained by the Africans brought to Costa Rica during slavery. Very telling is the fact that in 1739, the Africans worshipping La Negrita were accused of, “so-called pagan traditions that arose around her feast day.”¹² It was at the presence of these African rituals that the Catholic Church began a dedicated appropriation of La Negrita, taking her out of African hands and into a “white” national narrative that remains firmly in place in the 21st century. Attempts by the nation to “quell/subdue” African spiritual practices and their overt presence continued to occur with the emergence of a new Afro-descendant population of workers who arrived 48 years after the ending of slavery to work for the Northern Railway Company.

I ask myself what would life have been like for my West Indian ancestors if they had known and understood that they were following the migratory patterns of Africans who landed along the same coastal area in 1502 with Christopher Columbus? According to Trevor Purcell, “most slaves in Central America were purchased from the English in Jamaica, suggesting the probability of a strong West Indian link among the earliest Blacks in the region.”¹³ With this knowledge, would these 20th century immigrants have exhibited more caution or firmer ties to their homeland in Jamaica? Would they like my maternal grandfather, decide not to “naturalize” into a Costa Rican, refusing to give up his Jamaican identity, though his four daughters and wife became citizens?¹⁴ With knowledge of the lives of Africans, both enslaved and free, in colonial Costa Rica, would these West Indians have been better prepared for the historically sanctioned legalized hostility that

¹⁰ Victor Sanabria Martinez, ed. *Historia de Nuestra Senora de Los Angeles*, (San Jose: Editorial Costa Rica, 1985), 211.

¹¹ Russel Leigh Sharman, “Re/Making La Negrita: Culture and an Aesthetic System in Costa Rica,” in *American Anthropologist* 108, no. 4 (2006): 850.

¹² *Ibid*, 846.

¹³ Trevor Purcell, *Banana Fallout: Class, Color and Culture among West Indians in Costa Rica*. (Los Angeles, CA: Center for Afro-American Studies Publications, 1993), 2.

¹⁴ Citizenship at that time meant access to education and my grandmother was very clear that her daughters were to be educated in San Jose; reaping the benefits of what Costa Rica had given to its Hispanic citizens for years. My grandfather, seventeen years older than my grandmother maintained a political allegiance to Jamaica. Though he learned to read Spanish, he never spoke it and when he died 45 years ago, he was given a burial plot in the “Cemetery of Foreigners” in San Jose which was owned by Americans at the time.

faced them in the forms of debt peonage, abusive labor relations, living segregation, ID carnets and *cedulas* which, like the Apartheid system of the South, needed to constantly list, contain, number and hold accountable the “potential” of Blackness through policing and divide and conquer?

With its independence from Spain in 1848, the Republic of Costa Rica understood that in order to grow economically, travel between the central highlands and the ports of the Caribbean coast was crucial. After several failed attempts to build a railroad internally, in the early 1870s, Henry Meiggs, an American and the pre-eminent railway builder of the time, was contracted to build the railway. Construction began in 1871 and was completed in 1890. Meiggs’s nephew, Minor Cooper Keith from Brooklyn, New York took over the railway construction by 1874. At the same time, he began to grow bananas, taking full advantage of the railway lines that had been completed on the Atlantic lowlands. Keith eventually negotiated a deal for the completion of the railway with the Costa Rican government called the “Soto-Keith” contract which granted him a 99 year lease to 800,000 acres of land, exemption from taxation and ownership of the railway when he completed it. Within a decade, Keith’s company emerged as one of the most important producers of bananas in the world. By the time the railway was complete over one million stems of bananas were exported, primarily to the USA. In 1899, the United Fruit Company was formed. An estimated 43,000 Jamaicans came to Costa Rica to work on the railway and banana plantations between 1891 and 1911.¹⁵

My great-Uncle Charlie Gourzong worked for more than 43 years in a number of capacities in the Limon office of the Northern Railway Company including as General Cashier. My grandfather, Stephen Robotham, worked for the United Fruit Company as the Foreman for the Dock workers until 1944 when he oversaw the workers’ payroll in the Northern’s Main office. These immigrants, seldom reflected in the visual art and photography of the time, were the central labor force who generated incredible commercial and economic wealth for both the Americans of the UFC and Hispanic Costa Ricans in the banana trade with the world. Their stories testify to complex migrations, community tensions, multiple identities, African based spiritual rituals and personal pride that bridged both a Caribbean sensibility with a Costa Rican nationalism:

The failure to recognize the contribution of people of African descent in the development of modern Costa Rica highlights the problem posed by the current [national] historiography. [Historians] failed to challenge the underlying assumptions about Costa Rica nationalism. The real Costa Rica is much larger and more diverse than is evident.¹⁶

The community which began to form in Limon comprised of Caribbean workers mostly under “debt peonage” where their wages were paid in weekly vouchers redeemable in the Northern’s Commissary, thereby tying workers to the job. This community was class conscious, highly literate, skilled, and cosmopolitan because of exposure to the world through the ports. This enclave understood themselves as former British subjects, they spoke English, were Anglican and Baptist and many, “perceived the Hispanic culture and lifestyle as inferior to their own and thus minimized their association with Costa Ricans.”¹⁷ Stuck between the ever-tenuous relationship with the American UFC and Hispanic Costa Ricans who were openly hostile to the presence of people of

¹⁵ Harpelle, *The West Indians of Costa Rica*, 15-26, 2001.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 189.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 157.

African-descent, these immigrants had to negotiate every aspect of their lives in Limon. The complexity of emerging into an Afro-Costa Rican from a West Indian cultural heritage was a painful transition in a country which legally attempted to violate their human rights in multiple instances. The Calderon government of 1942 passed a decree prohibiting the immigration of the “black race, Chinese, Arabs, Turks, Syrians, Armenians, Gypsies and Coolies.”¹⁸ Seemingly, Costa Rican Hispanics built their concept of whiteness on the general “othering” of global ethnics of color, especially those perceived to be on the margins of society. The immigration prohibitions went in line with the similar sentiments of the region which reeked of post-World War II national alignments of defining new borders. In the shuffle for alliances in the region, Costa Rica wanted to remain in the favor of the United States as it emerged as a super power during this time period. There were several countries in the Hispanic “world” who maintained the language of a Spanish (read: white) purity including Trujillo’s Dominican Republic. Therefore, Costa Rica’s immigration policies were clearly meditated and a part of a larger regional conversation on segregation and power. In the end, the largest tangible recipient of these exclusionary politics were people of African descent. Therefore, the children (like my mother) of West Indian immigrants were limited because they did not acquire the nationality of their parents at birth and were stateless, though born in Costa Rica, until they became “naturalized.”

Running the Northern Quarters: Limon, Costa Rica

My great-grand parents, Ruth and William Gourzong, came to Costa Rica to work for the Northern Railway Company at the turn of the 20th century. Ruth, a black woman, was born in Jamaica. William, a black man, came from New Orleans. He was hired to run the Northern “Quarters” (aka the Northern Hotel as christened by my family), by the company in the US and he went to Jamaica on the way to Limon, where he met and married Ruth. Together, they had seven children: Charlie, Winifred, Beatrice, Leonora (my grandma), William, Olivia and Victor – all born in Limon, Costa Rica.

When I hear stories of my family in Limon of the 1930s, I think to 17th century colonial Cartago. At first, in 1629 the Catholic Church forced free people of African descent to live in La Gotera, the outskirts of colonial Cartago. However, by 1650 *Puebla de los Pardos* was established formally for this population. Fast forward two hundred years and one finds similar living demarcations paralleled in Limon between the famous “black” Jamaica-town where my family lived and the “white zone” reserved for white Americans of the UFC and Hispanic Costa Ricans.

Harpelle notes, “The biggest employer of women in Limon was the United Fruit Company. Women were hired in large numbers to work as maids, cooks, nannies and general servants.”¹⁹ My great grandparents were the *sole* proprietors of the Northern Quarters, an exclusive temporary residence for the railway workers. The Quarters was a dormitory for the higher level railway workers who remained in Limon overnight on their way back to San Jose. Each room had a twin-sized bed and was cleaned exclusively by a Caribbean woman named Ms. Dora. Meals were provided three times a day. There were communal bathrooms and showers. Each of the men paid for their stay with signed vouchers and the amount was deducted from their salaries at the end of the week. My great-aunt Beatrice managed the kitchens through the ‘50s and early ‘60s until the Quarters closed its doors in 1963. Mrs. Moltan was the famed cook. Her daily soups and sliced cow tongue were praised amongst the workers. The young women in my family were not allowed

¹⁸ Ibid, 141.

¹⁹ Ibid, 108.

to go beyond the three private family rooms allotted to my great-grandparents. My great grandmother, Ruth, had the rare honor of having one of the only telephones in Limon and it was her responsibility to prepare special rooms if foreign guests were expected once she got the “call” from San Jose. An exclusive dining room was made available for foreign male guests, including the American bosses of the Northern Railway.

Though the Quarters were segregated and served only Hispanic Costa Ricans and foreigners who worked for the company, at William’s death in 1937, his wife, Ruth ran the hotel for more than 20 years as a widow who spoke only English. My mother²⁰ Norma Olivia, born to a first generation Limonese mother and a Jamaican father, has fond memories of her grandmother, who she lived with from kindergarten to second grades. Through her job as the hotel manager, Ruth was able to build a big house on the outskirts of Jamaica- town. Because of her veritable wealth, Ruth was able to financially assist her seven children and their families as well as play a central financial role in the upkeep of the Baptist Church, of which she was a Deacon and head of the Women’s Group. She owned several properties which she allowed her children and their families to live in, had wonderful house parties with a piano and gramophone and she had one of the first houses to have indoor plumbing with a huge bathtub and toilet. Not trusting the state of the banks in Limon, which had already been bankrupt a number of times during the 1930s, Ruth kept vast quantities of money (dollars and *colones*) hidden throughout her house. In old age, she hired a Black lawyer from Limon to write her will in which she allotted properties, goods and money to her family. She ensured that my mother went all the way through graduate school in Costa Rica. One of Ruth’s favorite pastimes beyond her responsibilities at the Northern and the Baptist Church was to travel – both locally and to the United States. She had the means as an independent, financially secure Black woman to stay at hotels in San Jose “just because.” My mother, the favorite grandchild, often accompanied her on “overnight” excursions to San Jose. It is not often that these types of narratives about successful West Indian women in Limon are documented²¹ as, according to my mother, there were many other successful Black women and men who served as role models and formed a tight network in order to advance their Costa Rican-born children into society. More often than not, this time period is framed around the tumultuous relationships between West Indian labor union, the Costa Rican government and the United Fruit Company.

My mother remembers that though her grandmother had no formal education beyond elementary school, she had a wealth of commonsense and was highly respected amongst the Caribbean community in Limon. When Ruth walked the one and a half blocks from her house in Jamaica-town²² to the Northern Quarters every day, Black men would stop and tip their hats at her. My mother would receive her monthly stipend from her grandmother when she went to college in San Jose (funded by her grandmother), tucked into a chicken-scratched letter of endearment and support. The irony of the barely formed letters on the page confirmed the sacrifice of one matriarch for her family, which today, boasts numerous doctors, lawyers, civil engineers, architects, professors, dentists, linguists and social workers.

²⁰ Personal Communication, September 2014.

²¹ See the doctoral dissertation of Asia Leeds, “Representations of Race, Entanglements of Power: Whiteness, Garveyism, and Redemptive Geographies in Costa Rica, 1921-1950.” (UC Berkeley, 2010); the MA Thesis of Diana Senior Argulo, “La Incorporacion Social en Costa Rica del al Poblacion AfroCostarricense durante el siglo XX, 1927-1963.” (UCR 2007); works by Afro-Costa Rican poet Eulalia Bernard, including, *Cienaga* (Asesores Editoriales, 2001) and any of the work by Afro-Costa Rican scholar, Marva Spence Sharpe and preeminent Afro-Costa Rican writer and current Commission for Afro-Costa Rican Affairs, Don Quince Duncan.

²² Jamaica-town is now Barrio Roosevelt in Limon, Costa Rica.

Life was not easy in Jamaica-town of the 1930s; however, Ruth (and her children who spoke enough Spanish to help her manage the Quarters as she grew older), understood that in order to survive she had to forge a community within Limon that called on the creative strengths of the Caribbean. My mother remembers having one pair of shoes for the entire school year which was put into the wooden stove in order to dry so that she could attend English school in the evenings after government-mandated Spanish schools in the morning. Those memories are juxtaposed sharply against a time when she was taken out of her parents' house and went to live with her grandmother, away from the shared bedrooms with her three other sisters. There were no more borrowed dresses, hand-me-downs or wet shoes for three years as she moved into a life of ease. My mother experienced a house with indoor-plumbing and a piano. She was also old enough to witness the methodical way that "Granny" saved and planned for her family; moving her children strategically to different properties that she owned, making investments and simply providing an ear and (financial support) for her neighbors who had less than she did. As a child, my mother lamented the same trait in her own mother as they struggled to make ends meet with four mouths to feed and eventually adding her two younger cousins after their mother died. Her mother, Leonora, would give away their Sunday dinner if there was a hungry family in the neighborhood who came softly knocking at "Mrs. Lee's" door because they knew she would never turn them away. These moments of kindness are telling because my mother hated the trips to the store where food was bought on credit when her father's paycheck did not stretch until the end of the week. It was in those discrete corners that "Granny Ruth" would miraculously provide the little extra to make the ends meet. These actions were also manifested in the Baptist Church, where Ruth provided funds in order to for the Church to be sustained. When my mother was sent up to a family friend in San Jose (an important Limon family who moved to the central highlands for work – one of the few black families established there) by her grandmother to attend high school then Teacher's College (in Spanish), Ruth paid for her room and board with the Curling family.²³ The Curlings, Afro-Costa Rican political activists, were changing the tide of legal rights for Limon-born West Indians and my mother and her sisters received the benefits of living amongst this family as they were helped to apply for "naturalization" after 1948 in order to become Costa Rican citizens. Ruth understood maintaining close knit networks both in Limon and in San Jose. She was politically astute and encouraged her grandchildren to be part of the changing national tide so that they could reap the benefits of their full civic and human rights.

Drawing Conclusions: The Way Forward

In many ways, the patterns of my family, re-affirm the general cultural patterns of West Indian immigrants who migrated to Limon at the turn of the 20th century. They had little association with Hispanic Costa Ricans, they were politically-minded and by 1920, Marcus Garvey's UNIA had established 23 branches in Limon, though many conservative and wary Jamaicans (including my family) stayed clear of UNIA activity.²⁴ My mother's generation (now in their late 70s), was

²³ Don Alex Curling was one of the first leading Afro-Costa Ricans in the 1940s who, as a lawyer, affected national policy on how the Costa Rican government would eventually treat Afro-Costa Ricans within the country; "for years, Curling urged Costa Rican-born West Indians to exercise their right to citizenship in order to build a more secure future for themselves" (Ibid., 175). His daughter, Thelma Curling was the lawyer who helped "naturalize" my grandmother, my mother and her three sisters.

²⁴ The radicalism of Garvey was seen as too extreme to many in my family, who were just beginning to enjoy the benefits of full citizenship. Taught not to "rock the boat," my mother and her siblings were expected to be moral, upstanding, Costa Rican citizens who respected their elders, participated fully in the Church community with the

the first to sit at the crossroads of statelessness as most did not hold a nostalgia for returning to a homeland in the Caribbean.



My mother, Norma (second left) and her three sisters July 1961, San Jose (photo courtesy of Natasha Gordon-Chipembere)

By using Ruth's life story in Limon as the sole proprietor of the Northern Quarters, a space where she had to single-handedly interact and negotiate with American bosses and Hispanic elites who worked on the railway, I have shown how she was able to successfully carve a unique space for herself in Limon during the mid-20th century. Ruth's multiple positions as mother, widow, laborer, Church elder, grandmother, property owner and shrewd businesswoman is a reaffirmation of the complex challenges and successes of Afro-Costa Ricans as they engaged the world around them – as postcolonial secondary migrations forced them to tumble and tangle with decisions about entering into mainstream Hispanic Costa Rica. Contrary to many notions of desired assimilation from this West Indian group vying to move ahead into Costa Rican "white society," I suggest that Ruth forged her identity on her own terms, rather than those of the nation state. I place her firmly in the historical trajectory of 16th century Africans in colonial Cartago who labored in the building of the country and did not readily acquiesce to the colonial terms of personhood. For me, this is a legacy of African descended populations in Costa Rica; and I believe that the nation will be richer as each life story is layered into its history.

My decision to leave my life in New York and relocate to Costa Rica with my husband and two children was, in many ways, a spiritual act of direct intervention. I felt that my writing could facilitate a discussion I know needed to happen, first within my own Afro-descended family and then in the larger Costa Rican community. When the United Nations declared 2015-2024 the Decade of the Afro-Descendant and the current President, Guillermo Solís, established the

ultimate goals of marriage, motherhood and education. As women of color from that that time period, political agency and activism was not as encouraged as community work and Church participation.

Ministry of Afro-Costa Rican Affairs with Quince Duncan as its Commissioner, I understood that I was entering Costa Rica at a “moment.” The contemporary trends in the region where Afro-descendent populations are attaining visibility and voice is also affecting the kinds of conversations that Costa Ricans need to have about race and racism. Of course, there are have been increased moments of tension, including the debacle after the National Symphony Orchestra²⁵’s decision in 2015 to create a musical performance based on the Costa Rican classic children’s book, *Cocori*; a simplistic Sambo-like narrative of a little Black boy from the Caribbean coast who has adventures with animals and is saved by the graces of a young blond girl. There has been a long political fight by the Afro-Costa Rican community to remove this mandatory text from the public education school system. What stood out for me in this debate was the “blindness” of many Hispanic Costa Ricans who could not “see”/“perceive” that not only was *Cocori* a caricature of Blackness but that the Afro-Costa Rican voice was valuable in their assessment of the discriminatory nature of the book.

Questions around censorship, hyper-sensitivity of Afro-descended people and racism emerged in public media and there were even death threats against some of the Afro-Costa Rican political leaders who were most vocal against the book. In August 2015, the United Nations asked Costa Rica to remove the book from its national curriculum as it was clearly racist. The year before (August 2014), Costa Rican’s constitution was changed to recognized the country as “multiethnic and pluricultural.” I feel as if there is momentum in conversations on race, power, voice and visibility that is part of a raised consciousness which was initiated by the Black Lives Matter Movement in the United States. What I have noticed from writing a monthly column on race and diversity in the *Tico Times* called “Musings from an Afro-Costa Rican” is that the desire is there for this conversation to be out in the open. I have received hundreds of emails from readers, many of them Afro-Costa Rican in various parts of the globe, who have affirmed my decision to challenge the many stereotypes about Puerto Limon by putting in place narratives of real people who had lives of success. I write about real Afro-Costa Rican families who have established legacies and who continue to contribute to the well-being of Costa Rica. The simple fact is that many people have not had accurate historical information about their country. Across the board, *all* the Costa Ricans I have engaged with are *willing* to learn new information, and this what creates hope for me. Much of the history of Puerto Limon has died within the community and its diaspora. It is part of my person journey to foster these conversations between time and place in Costa Rica in order for a fuller, layered historical account to be created. My jobs is to call the names of those who came before me.

²⁵ See Robert Isenberg’s article, “‘Cocori,’ a racism debate, and a brief history of controversial children’s lit” for some perspective (*Tico Times*, May 6, 2015).

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