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**Novel Reconciliations:
The Discourses of Oppression, Feminism,
and Nation in *Calypso* and *Limón Blues***

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The challenge of establishing a niche for Central America within the greater Latin American tradition leads to an inquiry into Central American identity. Who is Central American? Who belongs in Central America? Who *is* there? As trite as these rhetorical questions may appear, they are at the basis of a process of naming that is at the crux of this analysis. The matter at hand is who is *allowed* to define and be defined as Central American. The national imaginaries that were constructed by the *criollo* elite in the wake of independence posited Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama as an economic union of culturally *mestizo* states. The national subject has traditionally been masculine and his political imaginary has presumably formed synergistically with that of his national history. The exclusion of black experiences is a common feature of Central American intellectual traditions; it is the purpose of this study to uncover the unequal distribution of privileges afforded by color, language and spaces. A closer look at Costa Rica is in order.

The texts I examine here, Anacristina Rossi's *Limón Blues* (2002) and Tatiana Lobo's *Calypso* (1996), strategically deploy a feminist rhetoric in order to challenge the *mestizo* subject of the Costa Rican national imaginary. Not only do these texts privilege women's experience, they also attempt to bridge the gap between *History* and *history* by focusing on the West Indian presence in the country. *Limón Blues* is set in Costa Rica's Limón Province in 1904. It is a rich text that details how the Universal Negro Improvement Association was founded in Costa Rica, all the while exploring a female-centered erotic discourse involving black and white Costa Rican women alike. *Calypso* is set in Parima Bay and because it follows a matrilineal scheme involving the destinies of three women: Amanda, Eudora and Matilda, it is also able to track the socio-economic changes that transform this coastal town from the isolated hamlet of the 1940s to a tourist's paradise of today. The central argument of this paper is that *Calypso* and *Limón Blues* bridge the multiple oppressions of race, class, gender and

sexuality thereby transitioning from a benign multicultural approach to a strategic “reconciliatory” venture in Costa Rican letters.

Costa Rica is the sole country in the isthmus to have abolished the military, to have spurred environmentalist movements unparalleled by its neighbors, to have established guidelines to restrict immigration from surrounding countries and to have reformed its healthcare system. Compared to its neighbors, Costa Rica is in the best position to compete in the global market, primarily through tourism. It has been heralded the “Switzerland of Central America,” as it was described satirically by Mario Sancho in 1935. As early as 1844, travelers to Costa Rica corroborated the myth of whiteness that had begun to define the country. The Scottish traveler Glasgow Dunlop declared, “the inhabitants of the State of Costa Rica are almost all Caucasian, having not been mixed with Indians as they were in other parts of Spanish America, and the few colored inhabitants have without a doubt arrived from neighboring States” (my translation 84). Ever aware that Costa Rica’s position hinged on a national imaginary predicated on ethnic homogeneity, intellectuals and politicians alike reacted publicly to the growing presence of Caribbean immigrants recruited by the United Fruit Company to work on their banana plantations. “OUR BLOOD IS BLACKENING! And if we continue like this, it will not be a nugget of gold that comes out of the crucible, but rather a piece of charcoal,” exclaimed Dr. Clodomiro Picado, one of Costa Rica’s most important scientists in 1939 (244). The discourse of eugenics that elite intellectuals promoted in those years did not fall on deaf ears. The black diaspora responded by establishing a chapter of the Universal Negro Improvement Association territory, promoting economic self-sufficiency and developing a literary/artistic tradition that would promote the notion of a unified black world. As Santiago Valencia Chalá observes, more than in any other Central American country, West Indians in Costa Rica were politically mobilized since their arrival, establishing cooperatives and political organizations that still exist today. They maintained a great devotion to the British Empire, electing to send their children to private schools run by Jamaicans where they would be taught English and the Anglican religion (Valencia Chalá 65).

The Costa Rican black diaspora’s participation in national economies has underscored their permanence in the country, making them the subject of heated debates about ethnicity and citizenship throughout the twentieth century. These debates find a central place in the political arena and are transposed to literature as well. Two exemplary novels, Carlos Luis Falla’s *Mamita Yunai* (1940) and Joaquín Gutiérrez’ *Puerto Limón* (1950), stand as a testament to the utility of historical materialist approaches to the pervasive racism and exploitation of black laborers working for the United Fruit Company. Quince Duncan, the most prolific Afro-Central American novelist, has argued that the racial problem in Costa Rica is not the existence of the black man *per se*, but the failure to acknowledge the reality of institutional racism and ethnic tension in interpersonal relationships (Grinberg Pla 2). Their oeuvre represents a radical departure from constructions of the national subject—white, male, middle-class—and his national history. These authors account for race and class whilst constructing the *histories* of a heterogeneous Costa Rican citizenry. Feminist interventions like those of

Tatiana Lobo and Anacristina Rossi add a consideration of gender and sexuality to this subversive literary practice.

The Parima Bay of *Calypso* and the Limón of *Limón Blues* are not paradisiacal Caribbean settings. Beyond sharing tropical climates, these locations give rise to parallel conditions that are central to shaping the quintessential Caribbean woman's identity that is the focus of this essay. Both communities are located in remote locations away from the capital and are thus politically marginal and economically autarchic, seldom coming into contact with white families or the white plantation overseers and owners. Male and female, the black characters rely on cultural memory—one that has taught them to fear all representations of power and to avoid encounter, since terror for the black subject is fossilized in the master-subject relationship established in the slave period, as observed by bell hooks (175). Subsistence is at the root of the West Indian communities' survival in *Calypso* and *Limón Blues* while Costa Rica's agro-export economies thrive on their labor. The exploitative conditions of the plantation system are an omnipresent possibility that is in every black subject's ken.

The cultural memory of slavery and the plantation system has a ghostly presence in the black imagination in both texts. Antonio Benítez-Rojo observes that for the Caribbean subject, the plantation is an “old and paradoxical homeland,” a “hollow center of the miniscule center that gives shape to [his or her] identity” (54). The fragmented Caribbean self is persistent in its compulsion for inner unity and only unearths it when it revisits that site where complex dynamics of creolization were unleashed by the growing demands of sugar and other cash crops, the plantation. Though it is a puzzling point of reference, the plantation has nonetheless been a recurring literary motif since the colonial period and makes a striking appearance in contemporary Central American literature that seeks to establish a connection with the Caribbean Basin's intellectual tradition. The fishing village in *Calypso* and the banana plantations in *Limón Blues* are the common sites where the spirit of black communities are broken and ironically foment gender-based resistance. Choosing them as spaces of gender-based resistance reverses the practice of privileging white urban spaces in the capital as the sites that afford agency to women. The female characters in these novels serve as witness to the crushing power of the plantation while, paradoxically, highlighting the centrality of the plantation in the black Afro-Central American community's identity.

Calypso reveals postcolonial silences and their implications for the present and future, a project that involves “revealing colonial conspiracies and dismantling their ‘regime of truth’ in fictional discourse” (Barbas-Rhoden 128). Women are present in references to Pocomania and in mystical references, such as transmutation. They are rooted to the Costa Rican Atlantic Coast and do not express any desire to migrate and leave their communities in search of opportunities elsewhere. In *Calypso*, Emily is a young girl who is fascinated by the local schoolteacher's story of Marcus Garvey. She revels in the possibility of telling her child the story about his Back-to-Africa movement. It was to her, “an idea whose time has come,” knowledge that she would later transmit to Stella Taylor, who had not yet been born, instilling in her a desire to return to Africa [...]. Miss Emily dreamt of a transatlantic voyage but, evidently, the dream never came

true—at least while she was alive” (Lobo 88). In fact, death marks the end of her responsibilities to her community and allows her soul to travel to the place of origin she yearned for in life. As this example illustrates, Miss Emily and the other women in *Calypso* are the key agents in the transmission of collective memory and they willfully restrict their power to their private/local sphere of influence, which generally does not extend beyond the children they raise and the individuals they love.

In *Limón Blues*, Nanah is struck by her responsibilities as a woman upon disembarking from the ship that brings her to the Limón Province from Jamaica. She gazes out to sea imagining her homeland and then at the six rows of mountains behind the bay that create the boundary between the Limón province and the “interior.” While the blow to her husband weakens his morale, she assumes her role as caretaker. As she told her son on many occasions, “Prince, your father, let his head fall like a dead chicken, but I didn’t let him sadden. [...] The city was full of people and activity. [...] There were four times more men than women and I started to cook for the single men” (Rossi 17-18). Nanah quickly learns Spanish and secures a job as a translator for the overseer in charge of the West Indian men working on the railroad. It is a position that keeps her rooted in the immigrant community and situates her as an insider in a situation that would otherwise render her and her family powerless. Years later, Nanah’s daughter-in-law, Irene, becomes exposed to the cultural politics of the Universal Negro Improvement Association chapter that serves the West Indian community in Limón. Though she is critical of black politics, she is likewise outspoken about the discrimination that *afrolimonenses* suffer in Costa Rica: “They insult us—*maifrenes*, *chumecos*—and even here in Port Limón, we’ve been barred from almost all the hotels, restaurants and swimming pools. What kind of life is that?” (Rossi 263). Irene serves as a metaphorical bridge between the first-generation black Caribbean immigrants who held steadfastly to their identities as citizens of the Antilles and a second-generation that must assume the task of deciding whether or to accept Costa Rican citizenship. Poignantly, Irene bears the charge of transmitting the values of her ancestors to her children on foreign soil.

The Central American revolutionary movements led to a new cultural boom that has most often been associated with testimonial literature and revolutionary poetry. Writers such as Gioconda Belli and Rigoberta Menchú—to name just two of the many that emerged in this period—reflected on gender and their commitments to social change in the context of raging civil wars. As Laura Barbas-Rhoden observes, these women’s narratives shed light on “the politics behind divisions such as elite/popular and literature/orality, and they bring into focus gendered dichotomies like public/private, passive/active, desired/desiring, which have been inscribed in the story of the past” (3). As political statements, *Calypso* and *Limón Blues* are solid critiques of *History* and its role in the subjugation of women and black communities. In the Afterword, Anacristina Rossi states her desire to capture in *Limón Blues* “a world that, due to language barriers, misunderstandings and Costa Rican racism, has remained outside of the country’s cultural heritage” (Rossi 398). Meanwhile, Tatiana Lobo’s 1992 publication of *Assault on Paradise*, a narrative that focuses on the massacre of indigenous peoples

and black slavery in the Costa Rican Atlantic Coast is clearly a preliminary study of the issues addressed in *Calypso*.

In marked contrast, the predominant trend in Central American literature since the civil war has been the exploration of violence in the private sphere and the burden of socially constructed gender roles. Though it is beyond the scope of this note to explore the themes of “mainstream” Central American women’s writing, their novels are the result of the disillusionment that follows the end of utopian revolutionary movements. Their writings run the tropes of pain and pleasure, sadism and snuff and feature female characters caught in a cycle of desire/frustration/self-destruction that leads them farther away from the romantic national fictions and closer to annihilation. As Beatriz Cortez observes, it is not morality but passion that moves the subject beyond reason and social values in contemporary Central American fiction (2). Given that *Calypso* and *Limón Blues* grant “femininity” center stage reflects an intentional departure from this concurrent literary trend and from overarching discourses claiming “the end of affect.”

Calypso and *Limón Blues* develop an essentialist view that highlights women’s virtues, namely the ethics of care, the capacity for peacemaking, the renewing power of motherhood. Working from an essentialist feminist philosophy closely aligned with that espoused by Hélène Cixous, these novels battle with hierarchical values that mark women’s place in discourse: activity/passivity; Culture/Nature; Head/Heart; and Intelligible/Palpable (Cixous 63). The overarching premise is that women have been erased from the national political arena and, being denied access to what Jürgen Habermas would call the public sphere (Habermas 5), women’s power is limited to her immediate sphere of influence. The novels examined here position women as caretakers to all members of their communities, and locate women’s empowerment in the control of their sexuality. In *Calypso*, the reader becomes acquainted with the enchantress whose beauty inspires the lust of the only white man in Parima Bay: “perfect work of nature, all the arts of black Africa had reached a definitive consensus: Amanda Scarlet was a tiny Dogon statue, Yoruba wood, a Bambara sculpture, Nigerian ivory, a stylized earthenware jar from Manbetu, a Baulé carving, Benin bronze, Dahome clay [...]” (Lobo 25). Though Amanda never submits to the white man who gazes upon her body, a schema is put in place in relation to the black woman’s body. It embodies an ideal whose origin is located in another hemisphere.

The otherworldliness of the black body likewise makes an appearance in *Limón Blues*. By all accounts, Irene is a devoted mother of two children whose husband is one of the most avid proponents of the Universal Negro Improvement Association chapter in Limón. Yet her body takes center stage in her first encounter with the Jewish doctor from New York who becomes her lover and father to her third child. You are not only beautiful, you’re vibrant, he tells her. “You incarnated my image of the tropics when I first saw you. [...] I had a frightful childhood, living with my nine siblings and parents in a tiny apartment in the East Side of New York, freezing in the winter. I had chilblains on my hands that hurt terribly” (Rossi 160). He is drawn to Irene because of the image of the tropics that he has sustained in his imagination since he was a child, dreaming of pirates navigating tropical waters. The adventure that he imagined, that made the cold

winters and the chilblains bearable, is in essence within his reach as he drives along the Costa Rican coast with Irene by his side. He revels in her vanilla smell in the midst of their lovemaking and when she professes the romantic attachment that he eschews, he reminds himself, "I shouldn't complain. You are the materialization of my tropical dream. What else can I ask for?" (Rossi 173). Professing pride in her independence, Irene is flattered to be the vibrant playground that her foreign lover wishes to explore.

Calypso and *Limón Blues* highlight the white subject's attraction to the black body and present it as a "seductive promise" that destabilizes the status quo—fixed, static, ordinary—quality of white identity. Indeed, "displacing the notion of Otherness from race, ethnicity, skin-color, the body emerges as a site of contestation where sexuality is the metaphoric Other that threatens to take over, consume, transform via the experience of pleasure" (hooks 180). The sexual experience transforms the white subject by assuaging feelings of ordinariness and deprivation of excitement. Believing that a certain spirit of the "primitive" resides in the other tests the white subject's notion of will, control, and boundaries. Since it is the *possibility* of transgression that garners the most pleasure in the eye of the beholder of the black body, I'd like to steer this conversation far from moral designations. The essentialism pursued in the frameworks of these texts is not "good" or "bad," but rather begs a response to the question of what is achieved as a result of its strategic deployment.

As the preceding examples demonstrate, location is central to staging the essentialist representation of gendered blackness in the tropics. The large, fertile Central Plateau is a tectonic depression over which the most important cities in the country have been raised. This valley is considered the cradle of the improperly termed "Costa Rican culture," leaving the indigenous peoples living in reservations, the Lenca groups in the Guanacaste Province and black Costa Ricans in the Limón Province outside of the national imaginary. Writing about these sites is a political maneuver. As Maurice Halbwachs reminds us, collective memory is socially constructed: "While the collective memory endures and draws strength from its base in a coherent body of people, it is individuals as group members who remember" (22). Considering the world of the text, these novels suggest that women bear the burden of memory and draw on their context to recall and bear witness to the past. Stepping away from the text and considering the intellectual history of the isthmus, these novels oblige us to look to the Costa Rican Atlantic Coast so that we may modify the existing memories of the nation. Though we may have been convinced that all citizens were accounted for in the national imaginary, we find in these novels evidence of the black diaspora's cultural prestige juxtaposed to the manner in which it has been devalued in the construction of the national imaginary. *Calypso* and *Limón Blues* take their readers from the Central Plateau, over the Central Highlands, to the Costa Rican Atlantic Coast. Though reader and writer are in a privileged position being carried to the sandy beaches of the coast in a vehicle that remains attributed to the elite, literature grants access to a collective memory that is in a critical position today.

The smell of rondón stew, the sounds of calypso music, the sights of lavish costumes in parades and beauty contests are vital to the preparations involved in

planning Costa Rica's Black Heritage Festival held throughout the month of August. The Festival culminates in Port Limón on August 31, the national holiday designated as the "Día Nacional del Negro y la Cultura Afrocaribeña," with a Gala Parade and the "Fraternal Gathering Celebration" at the *Black Star Line* building. Built in 1922 to serve as headquarters for the Port Limón chapter of the Universal Negro Improvement Association and declared national patrimony in 2000, choosing this building as the locus for the final festivities commemorates the Afro-Costa Rican population's struggle to be recognized as an entitled constituency in a country that has long projected a *white* self-image. It is in this context that *Calypso* and *Limón Blues* appear as remarkably similar projects of introspection that demand accountability for the historical neglect of both the landscape and the black communities of the Costa Rican Atlantic Coast.

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