

## Poetic Power: The Gendering of Literary Style in Puerto Limón

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### Introduction

Puerto Limón straddles the borders of two rather distinct cultural and geographical worlds. It is a port city on the Caribbean coast of Costa Rica whose history and people diverge from, and often conflict with, the national self-image, leaving the region culturally and politically ambiguous. As the busiest commercial port of Costa Rica, with a large population of *blancos*, all of whom speak Spanish, Limón is very much a Latin American city. With an historical connection to the banana plantations of the United Fruit Company that employed thousands of Afro-Caribbeans, all of whom spoke English, and as one of the major commercial ports contiguous to the Caribbean Sea, Limón is also very much a Caribbean city. The collision of these two worlds has caused its share of grief in the cultural alienation of an entire city and region, but it has also inspired a flowering of creativity as Limonenses stake out the boundaries of their own identity in the vacuum created by racism and socio-political isolation from the rest of Costa Rica.

One example of this phenomenon is the surprisingly fertile Limonense literary tradition that encompasses the published work of Limonense novelists or outsiders writing about Limón, and both the published and unpublished work of local poets. The 1940's witnessed a civil war which would radically alter the social fabric of the nation, and it also marked the first major literary interest in Limón as writers found a Marxist hero to champion in the banana workers of the United Fruit Company. Carlos Luis Fallas, a white Costa Rican from the Central Valley, wrote his most famous novel, *Mamita Yunai*, about the oppressive working conditions and the desperate need for socialist reform. Joaquín Gutiérrez, a white Costa Rican born in Limón, followed with *Puerto Limón*, which spoke through his new found communist perspective.

Quince Duncan, a young Afro-Costa Rican from Limón, was born around the time of Fallas' *Mamita Yunai*. Thirty years later, Duncan would leave his own

mark on the literary construction of Limón. While avoiding the overt political posturing of his white predecessors and contemporaries, Duncan offered a portrait of Limón life which did not shy from the harsher aspects of working and living conditions.

It was during the 1970s that Eulalia Bernard, an Afro-Costa Rican poet from Limón, recorded an album of poetry and music entitled, *Negritud*. The decision to make an audio recording of her poetry rather than publishing it in the more legitimate medium of print caused some controversy in the academic and literary world of Costa Rica. As a permanent member of the Pan-African Council and the first to introduce Afro-American Studies in a Latin American university, Bernard was no stranger to controversy in Costa Rica.

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

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

What should already be apparent in the body of literature available is the division of literary form between men as novelists and women as poets. Putting the stylistic division in this dichotomous relationship is perhaps overstating the case to make an analytical point<sup>1</sup>, but the fact remains that for much of the relatively short history of Limonense prose literature

the form has been dominated by white Costa Rican men. Two of the three most famous white Costa Rican authors to write about Limón, Joaquín Gutiérrez and Abel Pacheco, were actually born in the province. Carlos Luis Fallas was born in Alajuela, a highland province, but spent some years working the banana plantations of Limón. As insiders and outsiders, white men are writing the bulk of Limonense narrative, which would indicate a link between perceived socio-political power and the prose narrative form in literature. This article explores some of the reasons behind this gender distinction, and analyzes the literary products of women to understand more clearly how poetry is connected to the process of identity formation and the particular aesthetic of literary production in Limón.

### The Gendering of Literary Style

One might argue that the male dominated field of Limonense prose literature is simply a reflection of Latin American machismo in a male dominated publishing industry. This would not explain the success of white Costa Rican women novelists like Carmen Naranjo whose focus remains on more mainstream Costa Rican life. Nor would it explain the success of published Limonense poets like Bernard and Campbell. That is not to say that as Afro-Costa Rican women they did not have to fight for the publication of their work, but it does thwart any attempt at a simple explanation for the gendered stylistic dichotomy between poetry and prose.

The literary development of one author in particular may help illuminate the issues involved. Quince Duncan, the one Afro-Costa Rican who has managed to make a name for himself in Costa Rican letters, is an established novelist, with such acclaimed works as *Final de Calle*, *Los Cuatro Espejos*, and *La Paz del Pueblo*, and an academic, with the oft-quoted *El Negro en Costa Rica* and *Teoría y Práctica del Racismo*. When I spoke with Duncan in the Central Valley where he now lives, I asked him about his unique career as a Limonense novelist. He affirmed the formative role oral narrative played in his development: "The interest in literature came from several sources. One would be the fact that Afro communities at that time had no radios, no television, and so the grandparents used to tell us stories. Whenever there was a celebration like nine night or Christmas eve, they were always telling these stories, stories to entertain the children and to entertain

themselves."<sup>2</sup> Duncan also spoke of his grandfather and his unusual interest in reading: "My grandfather was a very non-typical peasant. If he got the newspaper that came in from Jamaica, he wouldn't mind sitting down to read it and forget about the crops, forget about the farm that day. He told me I could go into his library, which was formally under lock and key, and he left it open and said if I wanted I could read anything I could."

Perhaps most revealing is Duncan's account of the most important influence on his career as a writer:

Miss Robb used to tell me stories, she was always telling me stories, and reading stories to me. She called me one day and said she had problems with my eyeglasses, and I just got this book and would you help me and read these stories to me. Of course I said yes, but put the book in a corner of my room and forgot about it. One day she called me and said "Listen, I've been asking about those stories, and you've been telling me you know the next time, next time. Now I've been telling stories to you all your life, and I didn't believe that you would do that to me - knowing that my eyeglasses aren't working and you can not read the stories and come tell them to me." I felt so bad, so I went home and started reading these stories, and every time I go by Miss Robb's house I tell her a story. Later in my life, I've always thought that this malady with Miss Robb's eyeglasses was a very strange one because I remember seeing her reading the bible in church without any difficulty.

By reading the stories to Miss Rob, Duncan's world was reversed. He became the story-teller to the older generation, and it was an experience that profoundly affected him. The anecdote also illustrates the equal place of men and women in the old oral tradition. According to Duncan, in the "traditional framework of the black culture ... the old man and the old woman at the head of the family told the stories."

That traditional framework had been split apart in the aftermath of the Costa Rican civil war in 1948. President "Pepe" Figueres implemented a program of socialization which naturalized all Afro-Caribbean residents and nationalized education. As the private, English-language schools in Limón were replaced by new public, Spanish-language schools, the oral narrative brought by Afro-Caribbean immigrants underwent significant transformation. Like many cultural expressions of a diaspora population, particularly the African Diaspora, the oral tradition did

not die, but allowed itself to be broken and still usable. Rather than disappear completely, the tradition of oral narrative was split into two distinct aesthetic parts: the oral performance which women carried on in poetry (both published and unpublished); and the presentation of a cultural narrative which Duncan carried on in prose literature.

This gendered split in Limonense literary genres is not uncommon elsewhere in the Caribbean, particularly the Spanish-speaking Caribbean. As Marie Cristina Rodriguez points out, "there is no doubt that more women write poetry in the Spanish Antilles than stories or novels" (Rodriguez 1990:343). This trend is confirmed by Selwyn Cudjoe (1990:15) and by Catherine Davies (1996:154) in their respective discussions of Cuban literature. But the gendering of literary style is certainly not limited to the Spanish-speaking Caribbean. As Susanne Muhleisen notes, throughout the Caribbean islands, "women writers for a long time have featured much more prominently in poetry than in prose ... [and] there were hardly any female African-Caribbean prose writers and novelists before the 1980s" (1996:178).

Though various explanations are offered for this pattern in Caribbean literature, the reasons for this split and the resulting dichotomy in Limón are rooted in the historical and structural aspects of Costa Rican society, particularly as they relate to gender and ethnicity. As with any male-centered society, ethnicity in Limón is differently valued among men and women. Feminist writers have long pointed out that in a patriarchal system, men operate outside the established dichotomy (see Bordo 1986; Jay 1990). Just as people of color in a white dominated society are the only "ethnics," women in a male dominated society seem to be the only ones with a "gender" *per se*. Whiteness and maleness are undefined standards against which all else is defined in terms of the extent of difference. As Henrietta Moore writes: "Both men and women have to learn to locate themselves in culture, but for men this process is less ambiguous and less contradictory than it is for women" (Moore 1986:183). It is so because women have the added dimension of gender to consider in their calculation of economic survival and potential for upward mobility, where men must only contend with the potential liability of their ethnic affiliation.

In the case of Limonense literature and Costa Rican society, Quince Duncan, without the added liability of gender, could more easily "... identify himself with

dominant social values and representations, and essentially there is no contradiction between what is socially valued and his own value as a social individual" (Moore 1986:183). In the literature of the Caribbean and its littoral, it is the novel that is most clearly associated with the high social value of literate culture, and as Muhleisen notes, "may account for the high literary prestige it traditionally holds" (1996:178). As narrative fiction has long been valued as the stylistic convention of mainstream Costa Rican society, Duncan turned to the prose narrative aspect of the oral tradition. That is not to say that Duncan did not use that hard-won position of legitimacy to subvert racism using those same dominant social values, but it does suggest that as a male, even a Black male, Duncan could more easily translate the traditions of Limonense oral narrative into the legitimate sphere of published prose.

In contrast, Limonense women remain in the double bind of being both "not-men" and part of the "black" city, which largely excludes them from the legitimate realm of Costa Rican letters. As Gay Wilentz argues, "exclusion from the male culture produces/exposes a female culture which has been suppressed, ignored, distorted—but not destroyed" (1992:388). The response is a more subversive approach to literary expression, which lends itself to the translation of Limonense oral narrative into the more confrontational medium of literary performance in poetry.

But if this is an explanation of the gender distinction apparent in Limonense literature, it is only a partial one. There is a more consciously practical level at which the aesthetic distinction between verse and prose is intimately linked to the social construction of gender for both men and women in Limón. The fact that Quince Duncan was able to participate in the literary style of the dominant social group hints at the undercurrent of gender inequality that influences so many aspects of creative expression. As Muhleisen points out, the choices writers make, especially female writers, must "... be seen in the light of the 'gatekeeper' function of publishers" (1996:177). Elaine Savory supports this claim, adding that "the first boundaries of professional space for a literary woman are commonly established by literary men" (1996:16). The implication is that the gendering of literary style in the Caribbean and its diaspora is as much a practical issue of unequal access to publication as it is an issue of creative choice.

But beyond the gender discrimination of publishing houses in Latin America and the Caribbean, prose

narrative, especially the novel, requires an investment of time ordinarily impossible for women constrained to domestic productivity. This is perhaps more clearly seen in the context of the more strictly patriarchal society of Latin America and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, where the restriction of women to poetry appears more prevalent (see above). Where men are encouraged to cultivate leisure, women are considered idlers if they stray from domestic tasks. Even Elena Pardo, the one known example of a female novelist from Limón, is a retired widow wealthy enough to hire a full time maid and cook. Unlike women a generation ago, who could operate in a culturally legitimate aesthetic sphere as storytellers, most women in Limón today must create in stolen moments, brief snatches of time in the midst of domesticity. Rodríguez confirms this pattern in her analysis of women writers in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, noting that women poets "... seem to write poetry in the very few seconds they are able to steal from lives dedicated to other aspects" (1990:342).

In this context, it is perhaps not surprising that poetry has become the form of choice for Limonense women who choose to pursue literary expression. But the image of women turning to the literary left-overs masks the potential empowerment of poetry. Eulalia Bernard articulates her own reasons for choosing poetry as an expressive form over prose:

In poetry you can't move away from symbolism. The shorter the poem, to me, the better. People's memory is not in long everlasting sentences. People remember [she claps her hands in time—slap, slap, slap] fragments. Narrative fiction is fine, but they are more linear. You have a lot of room to play around. You remember the force of events, you remember a strike. I wrote a poem about the memory of a strike. You can't do this with narrative fiction. You can narrate the strike, and go into detail and who did what, but its more like journalism. When I perform this poem, the people in Limón just go wild. From the youngest to the oldest. Black, white, red whichever, they really respond to it. It evokes a lot. It makes it universal.

For Bernard, the power of literary expression was found in not turning to the mainstream, but seeking the performance of memory inherent in the oral tradition in a new form. The discovery for her, and many other women, was poetry. As others have pointed out (see Buffong 1996 and Muhleisen 1996), women have long been associated with the oral and performative aspects of

storytelling and therefore remain in the vanguard of literary preservation as oral narrative disappears throughout the Caribbean and its diaspora. Through poetry, women retain the performative aspect of storytelling in a literary form that lends itself to the brevity required in an often constrainingly patriarchal environment, particularly in Spanish-speaking contexts. Also, as poetry is easily memorized and does not have to be written down, much less published, female poets do not have to submit to publication as a means to legitimization (though some have with impressive results).

This serves an important dual purpose. As a creative expression that does not have to submit to the legitimizing institutions of Limonense or Costa Rican society, poetry carries a certain subversive currency. By turning to poetry, women have enacted an aesthetic shift in response to a socio-political shift. Theirs was a culturally subversive act that challenged the gendered social structure not through overt rhetoric, but in daily aesthetic practice. As we shall see below, that daily aesthetic practice has itself become more overtly subversive.

Taken together, the various arguments presented above offer an explanation for the gender division in literary style. This will inform the literary analysis to follow which seeks to carry the various perspectives on power and aesthetics into the works of women poets in and from Limón.

### The Empowerment of Verse

By emphasizing the performative aspect of verse, and by creating their own niche outside the legitimizing forum of commercial publication (or at least challenging the conventions of that forum), women poets tap into a source of power traditionally denied them by the constraints of Limonense and Costa Rican gender divisions. Through these avenues of empowerment, women have used poetry to comment on and critique not only the often repressive construction of gender in Limón, but also the overarching milieu of regional dis-empowerment felt by all Limonenses.

### Publication and Legitimacy

Women poets, for the most part, remain unpublished and therefore excluded from the legitimate sphere of Costa Rican literature. As such, women poets are much



like the storytellers of earlier generations, whose performances operated within a local sphere, on an internal value system of legitimacy. On another level, unpublished can also mean "not for the public," amounting to a privatization of expression among women.

Because it is often privatized, Limonense women's poetry is infrequently encountered, especially by the occasional anthropologist. Still, those moments when it is revealed hints at a much deeper and far-reaching phenomenon. A small gathering of women poets reading their work on Negro Day, or the quiet young woman who found the courage to read one of her poems in church and later confessed to her passion for composing verse, or the middle-aged neighbor who would invite my wife and I for rum and coke and private readings of her poetry all indicate this informal poetic movement among women in Limón.

These and other occasions help clarify the local reworking of expressive legitimacy among women in Limón. By appropriating their own space for creative expression, women poets are reclaiming the internal value system of legitimacy established by earlier generations. By operating outside the boundaries of a received, outsider's aesthetic system, women poets are challenging that system through their very existence. More than the words they use, though those are powerful themselves, women poets are offering a phenomenological critique—a critique vis-à-vis being-in-the-world by being outside the world of so-called aesthetic legitimacy. It should not be surprising that women are the ones at the forefront of this challenge since they are all too familiar with the notion of exclusion and operating on the outside of established boundaries.

The challenges made by the grass-roots poetry of local Limonense women is buttressed by the two prominent examples of published women poets. Eulalia Bernard and Shirley Campbell have both published collections of poetry in Costa Rica and gained some notoriety in the United States and elsewhere. Bernard and Campbell have used their access to literary legitimacy to critique the constraints of that system.

Perhaps the best example of this is Eulalia Bernard's first publication. After starting a successful career as an academic, and one of the first professors of Afro-American studies in Costa Rica, Bernard used her increasing notoriety to push an alternative approach to poetry publication. I will let Eulalia explain in her own

words:

I started the Afro-American studies at the university level because I felt that it should not be a folkloric approach, which is the kind of approach that dominant groups give to other groups, they play with them at the folkloric level. My album was the first protest to that. That's why I did not write a book, I recorded a record. It's more modern, and it could get to the people because it's oral tradition. So people could listen to it. If I started with a book, many times books don't get where you want them to get. You have to be good reader, and some people can't read that well so you can't get to them. With a record it was "boom!"...That's why I made the album, because that was getting out of the system. It had a lot of messages. I was also challenging the system. Saying, "I don't need to write a book." After, of course, I did books, but I purposefully did not write a book [at first]. And I got the reaction I wanted, because the status quo was very angry and the people were very happy. And now everybody is happy.

Bernard, conscious of her position in regard to the dominant non-Black society, purposefully chose to record an album as a challenge to the structure of legitimization in Costa Rican literature. The response to her debut was not unlike the reaction to the poetry of Louise Bennet in Jamaica, where the literary elite regarded her "more or less as a local joke" (Cudjoe 1990:27). Unlike prose narrative, which rarely enters of the lifeworld of Limonenses, the poetry of Eulalia Bernard, like the poetry of so many Limonense women, was born in Limón and intended for Limonenses. Again, like women poets in Jamaica, Bernard joins spoken and written language such that, "... essentially, the poet acts as a scribe for the ideas of those who cannot or do not record their own experiences" (Thompson 1993:47). By recording an album, Bernard was able to maintain a connection to the performative aspect of poetry, which in her view gives it much of its power.

### Performance and Authenticity

In as much as most Limonense women poets have not achieved, or even attempted, national publication, local poetry remains relatively private. As a private performance, or at least, a performance that women control, poetry opens a venue for empowerment.

This issue of control becomes more clear in instances

where women do decide to share their compositions. One woman, who had asked my help in typing up some of her poems, carefully checked over my transcriptions to make corrections. She explained: "the way the poems sound is as important as what the words mean, and one incorrect word would change everything." She talked about the rhythm of a poem and how word choice affected that rhythm. "I don't like other people to recite my poetry. When I write a poem, I hear it in my head. I know how it is suppose to sound." She, like other poets, stresses the performance of poetry as much as, if not more than, its inscription.

Eulalia Bernard shares this approach to poetry, as illustrated in her decision to make an album before she published a book. For Bernard, live performance is also still very important: "I usually deliver my poetry in performances, and that is better for the people. They can feel it and respond. Sometimes I would recite a poem and they would respond. Especially the poems in Creole [Limón Standard English], they respond, they'll answer me, they'll say things." She describes the performance aspect of poetry as a union between the dramatic and oral arts. For her, poetry is not merely recited, but performed in the full sense of the term. Recently, Bernard has toured with a calypso band, singing their songs and her poetry together.

Bernard's link with calypso music illustrates the fluidity of poetry's expressive boundaries, which subverts the constraints of literary legitimacy in favor of cultural authenticity. The performance aspect of poetry links it with expression in music and dance beyond Bernard's creative use of calypso. The source of poetry's power lay in its ability to act outside the dominant society's sanctioned bounds of legitimacy (the right way to write), and connect with Limonenses on a phenomenological level through the embodiment of aesthetic expression which is inside the more fluid and locally constructed boundaries of authenticity.

To be clear, this use of authenticity is not concerned with claims as to who or what is more "truly" Limonense (see Jackson 1988:16), but it is used as a heuristic device to examine the situational conflict between various social levels. The concept of legitimacy, especially literary legitimacy, is the product of certain socially constructed boundaries of acceptability; who is and is not a writer. As with most elite cultural institutions, this is a top down process in a social hierarchy which often excludes those at the bottom, placing Limonense women in the double bind

of being devalued as both female and ethnically Other. The notion of authenticity used here evokes a Foucaultian emphasis on discursive resistance not unlike the "nation language" dialect poets of Jamaica who seek to express "the true voice of the people" (Thompson 1993:45) by operating below the radar of legitimacy where aesthetic expressions may connect to experience without legitimate credentials.

### Poetry and the Subversive Voice

Having created a space in which to create in an authentic Limonense voice, that is to say, without the caveat of being accepted by mainstream Costa Rican publishing houses, women poets have had much to say through their compositions. Though there are some clear polemics running through the various works, it is difficult to pin down one particular message of the poetry. Many convey simple truths about life in Limón or life in general, but their access to the expression of this simplicity is itself a subtle subversion of their expected roles as women.

As an expressive form in which women maintain control over the creative process, Limonense poetry, perhaps not surprisingly, has become a forum to directly critique the construction of gender. According to Eulalia Bernard's poem, "To women's Liberation," "The Problem is not the Difference / But the Interference... / This is the way I see it" (Bernard 1991:20). In her poem, "Equal Opportunities," Bernard writes: "You need: / Low moral pressure, zero dignity. / If you be a woman..., forget virginity. / Bless the Lord for Equality...; / 'With the sweat of thy brow thou shalt / Find thy bread.' ...or, maybe it read: / 'With the cold sweat of your hungry body / Thou shalt ... \_\_\_\_\_'" (Bernard 1991:29).

But this critique does not necessarily call for a reorganization of gender roles, rather it seeks the valorization of "women's roles" among Limonenses. This can most clearly be seen in the poetry dedicated to motherhood. In the unpublished poem, "A Una Madre," by Vera Beatriz, motherhood is extolled in lines like: "Mother Eternal. / Until the end / Your pain is that of all mothers / When they see they are losing a child"; and "... to God / Who made mothers / To help Him / Guide Humanity. / Woman, Mother. Mother. / Until the end" (composed in Spanish<sup>3</sup>). Bernard, in her English poem, "Intangible Love," contrasts a child's simple question, "Mama; you love me?" with a stanza

expressing the unspoken sacrifices through which mother's communicate love. The last two lines summarize the point: "Well son a glad you find out say / That Black mother's love is intangible" (Bernard 1991:37).

Bernard's poetic approach to gender roles does not exclusively focus on women's experience. As Kitzie McKinney observes, "unlike many black women writers, particularly of the Caribbean, who represent the male as an absent or negative figure, Eulalia Bernard remembers the experience of her community as Antillean male immigrants founded settlements, sent for families, and supported their communities" (McKinney 1996:15). Much of Bernard's poetry valorizes men, as demonstrated in the most recent collection of poems, *My Black King*, dedicated to "all the men of my family ... [who] have given me a beautiful childhood, challenging adolescence and creative adulthood" (Bernard 1991:3). Poems like "Straight Talk" and "My Black King" illustrate Bernard's commitment to men as part of the key to gender equality: "I love men... who can be / Good friends; important fathers"; "I tremble with pride, when I see ..., / The look of power in your black eyes. / ... / And I tremble again with pride / And I cry...: 'My Black King, / Here is your bride!'" (Bernard 1991:17,18).

Bernard's valorization of men in her poetry is a conscious part of her desire to rehabilitate a local Limonese sense of self, a cohesive identity for the city and the region. As such, her poetry focuses on men and women, critiquing the structural inequalities that effect both. In her own words: "I think what happened during slavery, good and bad, had to do with the male. If there was anything intentional in carrying out the policy of racism it was directed to the male. Because they are the procreators and they are the providers, if you can get the males to internalize their dependency and their weakness then you have an easy road to domination. So I subvert that." Bernard views the effects of racism as unevenly distributed between men and women, each requiring a special rehabilitative approach in her poetry. This emphasizes the complexity of gender differentiation in identity formation. Simply put, women have the added complication of "a gender" in the negotiation of a Limonese identity that hinges mostly on men sorting through "an ethnicity."

Bernard and other women poets in Limón serve as an important corrective to this dilemma in two crucially important ways. First, by emphasizing the taken-

for-granted notion of "male-ness," women poets insert the modality of gender into the experience of identity for both men and women. Second, as we shall see, by appropriating the language of ethnicity, women poets situate themselves on equal footing with men in the on-going negotiation of collective Limonese identity.

With the recording of the album *Negritud*, and the publication of *Ritmoheroe*, Eulalia Bernard blazed the path for women's critique of Limonese and Costa Rican society. Joined by Shirley Campbell with her poetry collection, *Naciendo*, the two Afro-Costa Rican women poets established a clear challenge to the status quo that was partially feminist, but mostly operating outside gender categories to assert their own perspective on racial and ethnic discrimination. Both women are also academics, Bernard in Afro-American studies and Campbell in anthropology, which adds a certain amount of intellectual legitimacy to their attempts to express an authentic Limonese aesthetic.

In her Spanish poem, "Deseo," Bernard demonstrates a feminist approach to cultural critique: "I have the sensation / of a tormented womb / when in my solitary nights / I think of / my fight, abandoned / by my fragile body, / outstretched in bed. / I wish I could devour an / ounce of Solomon's strength / to continue the / construction of the redemptive temple / of my / people: Limón" (Bernard 1982:27-28; composed in Spanish). Bernard's focus on the literal embodiment of the struggle to build a cohesive identity for Limonenses is important for its overt representation of that body as female and the likening of the struggle to giving birth. The fact that she composed the poem in Spanish adds to the overall identity confusion for Afro-Costa Rican Limonenses. Shirley Campbell also places the struggle of self-identification in a female body in her poetry: "I birthed children without white flesh / I gave them these black breasts / Without white milk / But with the restoration of dreams / (because life's blood returns to us / from so much struggle for liberty) / ... / I brought them the day, wet to the touch / with a small taste / like earth / or new life / like love that creeps / within the womb" (Campbell 1988:13; composed in Spanish). Both poets provide insight into an overtly feminist perspective long silenced in the struggle for regional self-identification in Limón. According to McKinney, this trend in Bernard's poetry, and by extension the work of other poets in Limón, is motivated by the desire to "transform the female body from a passive, stereotyped sex object to a poetic and political symbol

and agent of change" (McKinney 1996:15).

But their participation in that struggle, and that of lesser known, unpublished poets, also includes a more general critique of ethnic and racial essentialism. This often translates into a direct appropriation of blackness from the rhetoric of repression among outsiders for use as an internal rallying point for self-identification. One local poet, Prudence Bellamy, in her unpublished poem, "No Debo Ninguna Disculpa," writes: "I don't need to apologize / because my skin is black / ... / Nor do I need to apologize / because / by the divine gift / of my physical strength / I contributed to the socio-economic development / of so many nations in the world" (composed in Spanish). Shirley Campbell offers her own poem of encouragement toward self-identification: "Let's fill ourselves with tomorrow's victories / dream men of stone / and of fire / pierce love / and struggle / discover skin / and history / only then / do we begin" (Campbell 1988:10; composed in Spanish).

The invocation of blackness comes most often from Eulalia Bernard in poems like, "My Black King," quoted earlier, and "Requiem a mi primo Jamaquino [Requiem to my Jamaican cousin]": "He had detours and more detours / from white papers from white hands / to say simply: / 'I am a field Negro; / from Star Valley. / I am a black star / in the bright white, blue and red / of our flag'" (Bernard 1982:36; composed in Spanish). In poems like "My Last Chains," Bernard connects to a more essentialized blackness: "I shall break my last chains / Never more shall I say 'Fatherland' / My compatriots I shall seek / throughout the magnitude of the Universe; / From among those, in whose eyes / I am reflected" (Bernard 1991:45).

In perhaps the clearest example of Bernard's poetic connection to the more general African diaspora, "Nosotros [We]," she writes: "We yearn for other seas / We dream of other forests / We feel other gods / We are others here / We are others there / We are others... / Let us knock down those forests / Let us search for new seas / Let us invent our gods / Let us intone fresh songs / We are" (Bernard 1982:91-92; composed in Spanish). Interestingly, this poem was composed in Spanish, serving as a counterpoint to the otherwise separatist tone. Still, Bernard's poems reflect the same ideological claims of a universal black identity. Bernard aligns herself with the politics of pan-Africanism in her poetry and her academic life, overlaying her poetic depiction of Limón with the rhetoric of this ideological position. Bernard describes herself as the voice and memory of not

only Limón, but the entire African diaspora and the "diaspora of the working class." Bernard places Limón in a universal context, objectified as a small part of a much wider black community. While this lends power to the struggle for some semblance of cultural autonomy for the region and the city of Limón, it also runs the risk of diverging from the lived experience of Limonenses.

This divergence may be one of the reasons local, unpublished poets are composing a much less essentialized notion of blackness. Their poems more often uplift blackness as an inclusive, flexible nexus of identification without denying the intersection of various other ethnic influences. Vera Beatriz, a white Costa Rican, in her unpublished poem, "Limón," writes: "I love Limón / ... / For its blacks, a proud race and / brave, that made us different / and at times special / ... / Limón, mixture of races and colors / ... / Limón, music and flowers / Joyful and colorful / ... / They invite us to sing, to dance, / To dream, to dream ..." (composed in Spanish). Prudence Bellamy, an Afro-Costa Rican, in her unpublished poem, also entitled "Limón," writes: "... / Limón / Where we all live together / Because / Limón lives in the heart of / Each one of us" (composed in Spanish). This more amalgamated notion of Limonense identity fits with the comments many make about the sense of Limonense-ness, often identified as Caribbean-ness, that builds upon blackness in the formation of a flexible, internally constructed, multi-ethnic identity. But just as an ideological blackness runs the risk of essentialism, a "color-blind" approach to cultural cohesion runs the risk of masking repression behind the Latin American specter of "racial democracy."

### The Literary Aesthetic and Identity Formation

In the case presented above, the established boundaries of legitimate literary expression either excludes or greatly constrains women's participation. As a result, women are forced to seek new or at least more flexible forms through which to connect to authentic Limonense experience. As dominant groups set up boundaries of creative legitimacy, forms and styles become codified into aesthetic ideals which are perceived as immovable icons of taste. Cultural forms that are reified into ideal types immediately establish themselves as stagnate eddies in the swirling movement of lived experience. As



such, space is created for new forms, or at least more flexible forms, to connect with experience in a more authentic, though not necessarily legitimate way. Women's creative response to the legitimacy versus authenticity dilemma illustrated in poetry but evident elsewhere, reflects the broader struggle in Limón for cultural authenticity and their own internally constituted legitimacy.

Women's poetry in Limón is particularly important because of the way in which it incorporates other aspects of Limonense expression. Eulalia Bernard's album, *Negritud*, begins with several minutes of "funk" music indicative of the 1970s in which it was recorded. Over twenty years later, Bernard's anthology, *My Black King*, carries many of the poems written for *Negritud*, divided into dramatic Acts, and interspersed with sketches by Limonense artist Mario Castro. The two works show more continuity than difference, and both reflect the striving toward authenticity and the aesthetic of everyday experience in women's poetry. This includes not only music and painting, but also the connection to the history of oral narrative in the region. As Bernard and other women poets position themselves as the memory of the people, they are connecting to the past and in the process re-connecting Limonenses to older expressive traditions. Men may be able to re-tell the stories in prose literature, but for women poets, they are evoking the experience of the past in its multi-layered connection to the overarching and ongoing construction of Limonense identity.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>There has been at least one prominent example of a male poet in Limón. Known as the "Tailor Poet", Alderman Johnson Roden was a well-known figure in the port city in the early part of last century. His poems, however, were rarely if ever published, and as the height of his literary career was before the Costa Rican civil war of 1948, his rare vocation as a male poet might best be contextualized in the tradition of oral narrative that was still popular at that time. There has also been at least one example of a Limonense woman who writes prose fiction. Elena "Nena" Pardo, a white Costa Rican and retired school administrator, has self-published a collection of short stories as well as her first novel. Her contributions to Costa Rican literature are by no means well known, but she does serve as an important corrective to what might at times appear to be a strict gender division in literary expression. In any event, I would argue her focus on prose

literature is the exception that proves the rule, where "rule" is asserted in its most flexible connotation.

<sup>2</sup>All quotes not followed by a parenthetical reference are the words of local informants based mostly on taped interviews conducted in San José and Puerto Limón between June 1997 and June 1998.

<sup>3</sup>Where indicated, poetry was originally composed in Spanish and translated by the author.

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