Sex and Standing in the Streets of Port Limón, Costa Rica
1890 - 1935

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A certain woman call me a one pant man
I shouldn't be in society
callin' myself a calipsonian
but she say she goin' to run me out the country

Me no no breda me no no
what I done this wicked woman
I only sing me sweet calipso
She say she goin' to run me out of the land

She went and call the police on me
tellin' them I'm running contraband
when the government came down and see
they glad was to leave the calipsonian

She went and call the authority
tellin' them I'm a forgeigner
they came with soldiers and artillery
compelling me to show them me cedula

—Calypso lyrics by Mister Walter Gavitt Ferguson, Limonese composer

For a few heady decades at the turn of the nineteenth century, Port Limón was a boom town beyond compare. Bananas were first planted commercially in Costa Rica in the 1880s, on lands granted to railway impresario Minor C. Keith as part of the contract for his construction of the first rail line from the coffee-producing Central Valley to the Caribbean coast. Keith's plantations would prove enormously profitable, and in 1899 he merged his Costa Rican holdings with the Jamaica-based Boston Fruit Company to create the United Fruit Company. Vast tracts of lowland rain forest were cleared and planted in the province of Limón in those years, including tens of thousands of acres held directly by the UFCo and at least twice that in the hands of private planters, among them the Lindo family of Jamaica, Costa Rican entrepreneurs, and well-placed immigrants. In 1913 more stems were shipped from Port Limón than anywhere else in the world.[1]

The earliest plantation workforce was made up largely of the same Jamaican laborers who had formed the backbone of the railroad construction crews. In the following three decades, over 20,000 Jamaicans would come to Limón, accompanied by smaller numbers of migrants from elsewhere in the Caribbean: Barbados, St. Lucia, St. Kitts, Guadaloupe, Martinique. Banana production drew on the same circuits of Afro-Antillean labor migration—prompted by the decapitalization of Caribbean sugar production in the wake of emancipation—that enabled the construction of the Panama Canal in those same years. Indeed many West Indians came to Limón by way of Colón, the canal's Caribbean terminus. Smaller numbers of workers were drawn from Costa Rica's central valley, although there the still-expanding agricultural frontier, and favorable international coffee prices, meant that most workers found opportunities for independent or waged agricultural labor closer to home.[2]

Other migrants came to Limón from Colombia to the south, from Nicaragua and points north, from Cuba and elsewhere in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean. Indentured workers from the Indian subcontinent arrived by way of Jamaica; Syrian peddlers traded in dry-goods and sundries; Chinese merchants set up *pulperías* and *cantinas* [corner stores and cheap bars]. Travelers invariably remarked upon the heterogeneity and mobility of the people they encountered on the Caribbean coast in these years. In the late 1880s, A. Hyatt Verrill's fellow passengers on a ferry from Colón to Bocas del Toro (a smaller banana port at the border of Costa Rica and Panama) included "Men, women and children—black, brown and yellow; shouting, cursing, chattering, laughing; chaffing in English, French, Chinese, Spanish and Jamaican patois-cockney..."[3] The streets of Port Limón, the local police chief wrote in 1912, looked as if

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[1]The lyrics by Walter Gavitt Ferguson on the preceding page are cited in Victor Hugo Acuña Ortega, "Nación y clase obrera en Centroamérica durante la época Liberal (1870-1930)," in Ivan Molina Jiménez and Steven Palmer, eds., *El Paso del Cometa: Estado, política social y culturas populares en Costa Rica (1800/1950)* (San José, Costa Rica: Editorial Porvenir/Plumsock Mesoamerican Studies, 1994), 145. A detailed description of the organization of land and labor in the formation of the banana zone is provided by Aviva Chomsky, *West Indian Workers and the United Fruit Company in Costa Rica, 1870-1940* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1996), Ch.s 2-3. The labor process and national significance of railroad construction is explored by Carmen Murillo Chaverri, *Identidades de Hierro y Humo: La construcción del Ferrocarril al Atlántico, 1870-1890* (San José, Costa Rica: Editorial Porvenir, 1995). Bourgois provides an excellent sketch of the regional political dynamics of UFCo expansion: Phillipe Bourgois, *Ethnicity at Work: Divided Labor on a Central American Banana Plantation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1989), Ch. 2.

[2]Elizabeth Petras, *Jamaican Labor Migration: White Capital and Black Labor, 1850-1930* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1988); Velma Newton, *The Silver Men: West Indian Labour Migration to Panama, 1850-1914* (Jamaica: Institute for Social and Economic Research, 1984).

[3]Alphous Hyatt Verrill, *Thirty Years in the Jungle* (London: John Lane the Bodley Ltd., 1929) 91.

"practically the majority of the nations of the globe—Costa Ricans, Europeans, North and South Americans, Antilleans, Africans and Asians—all seem to have arranged to meet here…"[4]

This essay is about the politics of public space in Port Limón; about how individual and collective status was asserted, challenged, and defended; and about the contradictory roles that state institutions and actors played in that process. We begin with two anecdotes. In 1899, Louise Gordon sued Jane Parker for slander before the *alcalde* [mayor] of Limón, claiming that the previous morning at nine, while she was chatting with Annie Cummings at her stall in the market, Parker had yelled across to her "that I was a whore, a filthy pig… I asked, who are you talking to? and she repeated herself, saying it was me she was insulting, since I was talking about her."[5] On a nearby street in 1902, as the Governor of Limón telegraphed to his superiors in San José, "Due to personal disputes motivated by despicable articles published in one of the so-called 'newspapers' of the capital, *don* Eduardo Beeche gave *don* Lucas Alvarado several blows with his cane: there were no serious consequences."[6] Beeche and Alvarado were both wealthy and influential citizens, active in electoral politics; Alvarado was a former *alcalde* himself. Their conflict seems far removed from that of the two Jamaican market women (certainly Beeche and Alvarado would have insisted that it was). Yet in the following pages, we hope to show both the parallels and the direct connections between battles for status in each of these social worlds.

There are two rich bodies of scholarly literature which have illuminated the connections between individual status, intimate relations, and social structure, and both should be particularly relevant to the immigrant population of Limón. These are the literatures on honor and shame in Latin America, and on reputation and respectability in the Caribbean. Differences in kinship forms and associated values have been central to scholars' division of the world into cultural regions. Latin America, and especially the Latin American past, has been characterized with reference to the patriarchal family and the cultural complex of honor and shame. Drawing on the literature on honor in Mediterranean societies, authors argue that the maintenance of family honor, and thus social standing, relies on the control of female sexuality. Women must remain chaste until their marriage to men sanctioned by the head of the family. Men's honor is enhanced by their conquests of other men's women. Conversely men's honor is made vulnerable by the sexual activity of their own wives, daughters, and female kin. The honor/shame complex serves to reinforce social hierarchy because both wealth and political power are necessary to enact the ideal gendered strategies of shame and honor: female seclusion, and male sexual access to multiple women and dominion over multiple men. In turn, elite claims to embody a privileged morality serve to legitimize their excercise of material power. Recent scholarship, much of it dealing with the colonial period, has excelled in showing how honor not only shaped the social order but was also reshaped by the actions of those who invoked it, or were confronted by it.[7]

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[4]… and, he continued, "to where as well, as is natural, they have brought with them their varied customs and vices. Thus the immense labor, the great effort to coordinate divergent elements and purify the population of its bad components." Costa Rica, *Memoria de Gobernación y Policía* [MGP] 1912: 570.

[5]Archivo Nacional de Costa Rica [ANCR], Serie Jurídica, Limón Alcaldía Unica [LAU] 443 (1899). All translations are ours unless otherwise noted, and all parties' names have been changed (pseudonyms reflect original ethnicity). We have not replaced the names of public officials or well-known figures, such as Lucas Alvarado and Eduardo Beeche below.

[6]ANCR, Serie Policía 449, telegram 21 June 1902.

[7]An excellent overview of this literature is provided in Steve J. Stern, *The Secret History of Gender: Women, Men and Power in Late Colonial Mexico* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), Ch. 2. The accounts of Seed and Gutierrez have been particularly influential, and Martinez Alier's early work remains a crucial contribution. See Patricia Seed, *To Love, Honor and Obey in Colonial Mexico: Conflicts over Marriage Choice, 1574-1821* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1988); Ramón Gutiérrez, *When Jesus Came, the Corn Mothers Went Away:*

Quite different notions of kinship and values have been central to scholarship on the Caribbean. Anthropologists and sociologists have highlighted the multiplicity of family forms (alternately decried or celebrated), and the prevalence of sequential or simultaneous consensual unions, leading to the predominance of matrifocal families. One influential model of the cultural content of these forms has been Pete Wilson's account of reputation and respectability in Providencia. In his analysis, men seek reputation among their male peers, gaining prestige from sexual success with multiple women, defiance of public authority, and verbal dexterity. This he associates with an underlying ethic of equality. Women seek respectability through participation in churches, and aspire to (though rarely are able to enact) a moral code and social practices reminiscent of the British bourgeoisie, which in turn provide ideological legitimacy for the maintenance of social hierarchy. Subsequent scholars have questioned the rigid gender division of this model while at the same time confirming many of its specific elements. Recently Carolyn Cooper has analyzed sources ranging from 18th-century poems to contemporary dance hall lyrics to describe the opposition between "culture" and "slackness" in Jamaica. Cooper's descriptions of decorum and rude self-assertion, or "facetyness," echo many of the elements of Wilson's respectability and reputation, but present these as class-based strategies which cut across gender.[8]

As we shall see, each of these literatures has much to offer to our understanding of sex and standing in Port Limón. Gendered notions of honor were both central to conflicts over individual status, and invoked to naturalize social hierarchies. Selective rudeness and public rowdiness could both build individual reputations and challenge the social order. But the distribution of such strategies by gender, class, and regional origin was less clear-cut that one might think.

Much of this essay will be based on an analysis of the slander suits filed in the Limón judicial system during the heyday of the banana boom. The preserved slander cases offer an intriguing set of paradoxes. First, seventeen times as many slander cases were filed per capita in the province of Limón than in San José in these years.[9] Secondly, the majority of slander suits were brought by a category of migrant invisible in much of the official record, and little-discussed in the secondary literature on the banana economy: West Indian women. Thirdly, according to the Penal Code of 1880, *injurias* [slander] consisted of expressions or actions intended to bring "dishonor, discredit, or scorn" which harmed the recipient's "reputation, credit, and interests" Yet the women who sued for slander—washerwomen, peddlers, prostitutes—were precisely those women least honorable in the eyes of elites and official. In contrast the men who

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Marriage, Sexuality and Power in New Mexico, 1500-1846 (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1989); Verena Martínez-Alier, *Marriage, Class and Colour in Nineteenth-Century Cuba: A Study of Racial Attitudes and Sexual Values in a Slave Society* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989 [1974]). The continuing importance of honor, and its multiple uses and meanings in 20th century Rio de Janeiro, are brought out by Sueann Caulfield, "In Defense of Honor: Sexuality, Family, and Nation in Brazil, 1918-1945" (Ph.D. dissertation, Department of History, New York University, 1994).

[8]Peter Wilson, *Crab Antics: The Social Anthropology of English-Speaking Negro Societies of the Caribbean* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1973); Jean Besson, "Reputation and Respectability Reconsidered: A New Perspective on Afro-Caribbean Peasant Women," in *Women and Change in the Caribbean: A Pan-Caribbean Perspective*, Janet Momsen, ed. (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993); Carolyn Cooper, *Noises in the Blood: Orality, Gender and the "Vulgar" Body of Jamaican Popular Culture* (Durham: Duke UP, 1995). In Cooper's textual analysis, slackness and culture map onto the meanings constructed around orality and literacy. Purcell's sociological look at Limón draws in part on Wilson's formulation: Trevor W. Purcell, *Banana Fallout: Class, Color and Culture among West Indians in Costa Rica* (Los Angeles: Center for Afro-American Studies Publications, University of California, 1993), especially Ch.s 5 and 9.

[9]This figure is calculated from the yearly totals provided in the official *Anuarios Estadísticos* from 1907, the first year of their publication, through 1913, the end of the first boom of banana exports, as will be discussed in more detail below. A more detailed comparison of slander statistics from San José and Limón is also presented below.

filed such cases as often as not were themselves local elites and officials: plantation owners, contractors, police commanders. Finally, while the distribution and social standing of slander participants varied markedly across ethnic groups, the specific content of insults did not. Women were accused of sexual impropriety (with lavish and varying detail) and men were accused of theft or dishonorable business dealings.

By definition, slander cases had their origins in public defamation. The insults recounted in court testimony took place on the streets, at the public markets, in boarding-house patios, inside and outside of cantinas, at train stations. Almost without exception cases were urban in origin. A few originated in the junction towns along the "lines" that lead to the plantation zones; but the vast majority took place in the port itself. Thus, absent from these cases are the temporary camps and plantation barracks where the male laborers who made up the bulk of Limón's population resided and worked, clearing jungle, planting, and harvesting bananas. But it was precisely that plantation production, albeit at one remove, which shaped the social spaces where slander cases did originate. Banana exports fueled the booming port economy in all its guises, not only the scores of dock workers needed to load fruit into each of the outgoing steamers, but also the burgeoning employment in local government; the municipal improvement contracts with their associated boondoggles; the land speculation; the cantina world of brothels and bars. This last sector blended at its edges into the cheap hotels and boarding houses where women performed the labor of daily social reproduction which sustained the largely male workforce employed in export production.[10] In Port Limón and along the lines women provided cooked meals, clean laundry, and companionship, under a variety of arrangements both monetary and non-.

Who were the participants in slander cases? Two hundred and ten slander cases from Limón are preserved in the judicial section of the Archivo Nacional de Costa Rica. They date from the years 1892 to 1910. Of these, we selected an arbitrary sample of 74 cases for close reading.[11] Table 1 summarizes the origin and gender of all case participants, while Figure 1 presents the cases' chronological distribution.[12] Three-fifths of all slander case participants were

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[10]The concept of daily social reproduction is developed in a particularly helpful way in George Chauncey, Jr., "The Locus of Reproduction: Women's Labour in the Zambian Copperbelt, 1927-1953" *Journal of South African Studies* 7(2) 1981. For a convincing discussion of the role of prostitution in the social reproduction of a migrant workforce, see Luise White, *The Comforts of Home: Prostitution in Colonial Nairobi* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

[11]Certainly not all cases filed during the years in question actually made it to the archives in San José for storage. However we have not uncovered evidence of any systematic bias affecting case preservation, so for the purposes of analysis we assume that the extant cases form if not a random, at least a haphazard sample. We created our arbitrary sample by selecting every third case as they appeared in the card catalog.

[12]In the cases where a participant's origin was not specified, we classified them as either "[anglo]" or "[latino]" on the basis of surname; the two instances where origin was absolutely ambiguous we classified as "other." It's quite possible that a few "coolies" (as they were called) from the Indian subcontinent are among those listed as "Jamaican" in these documents, as Indian migrants in Limón often adopted English names. In choosing to group migrants as we have for the purposes of comparison, of course, we are already making assumptions about where the relevant social and cultural boundaries lay. Contemporary and oral historical accounts generally agree that Afro-Caribbeans formed one social group in Limón, though national distinctions were certainly relevant under some circumstances (see Bourgois, *Ethnicity at Work*, Ch. 5). For that matter, national labels are already in a sense tactical grouping of migrants whose local origins may have seemed, to them, more salient. In the rural community outside of Port Limón where R.S. Bryce LaPorte did fieldwork in the 1950s, those Jamaicans not descended from residents of St. Elizabeth's parish were considered something of outsiders. Roy Simon Bryce-Laporte, "Family, Household and Intergenerational Relations in a 'Jamaican' Village in Limón, Costa Rica," In Stanford N. Gerber, ed., *The Family in the Caribbean: Proceedings of the Second Conference on the Family in the Caribbean* (Puerto Rico: University of Puerto Rico Institute of Caribbean Studies, 1973), 83. The cultural identity between Costa Ricans and migrants from other Central American and Spanish-speaking Caribbean countries is even less clear.

Jamaican, and three-quarters were from the anglophone Caribbean as a whole. As a comparison of Figures 2 and 3, and 4 and 5 makes clear, the origins of plaintiffs and defendants were quite similar (with the one exception of Costa Rican men, who were far more likely to sue than to be sued). The most striking fact about our sample is the gendered pattern displayed. Almost 60% of slander participants were women, despite the fact that there were nearly twice as many men as women in the population of the province as a whole in these years.[13] As Figures 6 and 7 demonstrate, the national origins of plaintiffs differed sharply for male and female participants. Eighty-two percent of female plaintiffs were Jamaican, and 88% from the anglophone Caribbean, while only 35% of male plaintiffs were Jamaican, and 49% anglophone Caribbean. Put differently, male plaintiffs equaled or outnumbered females in each and every national group *except* Jamaicans.

Of our cases, 28 pitted female plaintiffs against female defendants, in 20 both parties were male, in 17 female plaintiffs accused male defendants, and in 9 instances male plaintiffs sued female defendants. Across all these categories, about four-fifths of cases involved parties from the same region of origin. That is, West Indians sued West Indians and Latinos sued each other. This is in keeping with a basic pattern of similarity between participants, who tended to be of similar social status. Such cases involved two stages of challenges: the original act of insult, and the subsequent decision to sue. For a case to result, at the first stage one party had to find the other neither so inferior as to be beneath her or his notice, nor too powerful to risk offending, and at stage two the other party had to make the same evaluation. Slander cases echoed the 'rules of honor' described for men in Mediterranean society: "the logic of challenge and riposte, in which a challenge both validates an individual's honor as recognizing him as worth challenging, and serves as a "provocation to reply."[14] Not infrequently, the case itself served as an additional "provocation to reply," inspiring the filing of a countersuit. This general pattern varied, though, in ways that have much to tell us about the bases of male and female honor, and the connection of intimate lives to public stature. Let us examine some specific patterns, looking to the relationship between the parties to individual disputes, and the specific contexts in which they occurred.

Some insults had their origin in a specific material conflict. In 1902 Frederick Davis denounced Jerome Bright for having said publicly, "You were a thief in Jamaica, a thief in Colon, and a thief here." The occasion, according to Davis' witness, was that Bright had tried to collect "the rest of the pay owed him for a job that they had done together in Banana River, to which Davis replied that he didn't owe anything, as the remaining money the Company commissary had deducted for goods Bright had bought on credit; and Bright said this was a lie, and Davis a lying thief." In Bright's version of the encounter, Davis responded to his request for

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Officials, for instance, made much of the "troublesome" and violence-prone nature of Nicaraguan laborers. (Bourgois observes similar stereotypes—and behaviours—among Central American workers on the Boca de Toro plantation today: Bourgois, *Ethnicity at Work,* Ch. 12.) The small numbers of lower class men from any Spanish-speaking country in this sample make this a moot point for the present purpose. At the level of professionals, bureaucrats, and the petty bourgeoisie—the strata from which, as we shall see, many male slander plaintiffs were drawn—Costa Rican, Latin American, and European migrants in the port seem to have formed a single social group.

[13]In 1892, there were 233 men for every 100 women in the province; by 1927 (after a decade of periodic recessions and outmigration by plantation workers to Cuba and Panama) there were 120 men for every 100 women. Jeffrey Casey Gaspar, *Limón 1880-1940: Un estudio de la industria bananera en Costa Rica* (San José, Costa Rica: Editorial Costa Rica, 1979), 227. Unfortunately, the first reliable census of Limón's population was that of 1927, so no statistical evidence on the gender and ethnic breakdown of the population as a whole is available for the boom years.

[14]Lila Abu-Lughod, *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in A Bedouin Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 90, citing Pierre Bordieu on the Kabyle bedouins.

the money owed by saying "that he didn't have the means to pay me now, and anyhow that *negros* as stupid as I should work for free." When Bright answered in kind, Davis "called me a son of a bitch and threatened to take me up before the authorities:" as, indeed, he did.[15]

A similar business dispute occurred between two Cuban contractors in 1906. When Miguel Ulyett went to collect the ¢100 that Manuel Xirinach owed him for carpentry work, Xirinach said "that he owed me nothing because I had taken some of the lumber for myself; that I had no right to complain about the cow I said I had given him, and that any way he had lost money on the business of building the hospital in Guápiles; to which I answered that if he had lost money on that contract it was because he'd been planning to steal a profit of four to eight thousand colones," upon which "he threw himself at me, and attacked me, calling me a *bandido,* [criminal] *sinvergüenza*, [shameless one] and thief."[16]

Monetary disputes likewise underlay the exchange of insults between Florence Thompson and her husband's cousin and his wife, who had accused her of stealing the pound sterling that they had given her to take to the cousin's mother in Jamaica; or that between Sarah Simon and David Newcome over the value of her brand-new market basket, full of 40 eggs and three pounds of coffee, which she claimed he had taken off the train at Zent Junction while her attention was elsewhere.[17] In such cases, the specific exchange of insults which served as the basis for the slander accusation might be almost incidental, and the accusation itself a strategic maneuver—sometimes an openly expedient one. Jamaican plumber William Williams had been fighting for weeks with "the *chino* [Chinese man] Joseph Lyng" over whether the pipes he had installed in the latter's store had been ten-cent tubes or fifteen-cent tubes; after Lyng again refused to pay and publicly called Williams a thieving son-of-a-bitch, one witness reported, Williams replied "that he could insult him all he wanted, since he knew where and how to get his money" (that is, as damages through a slander suit).[18]

A similar eagerness to use the state for personal redress was evidenced by the two suits for slander filed days apart by Martha Brown and Isabel Jamieson in 1907. Brown had called the younger woman over to her doorway, saying "I'll tell you not to keep company with my son any more," or, in another witness' version: "You evil woman, you took all my son's money last pay day." Jamieson answered, "Oh, I take [or fuck: the meaning is ambiguous in the interpreter's Spanish rendering, as it probably was in the original Creole] any thing I want if there's money behind it," to which Brown replied "If you want to be a whore I'll go the Governor and have him ship you out as a prostitute." Brown turned her back saying, "Don't you break my ass this morning."[19] (The threat to have Jamieson deported as a prostitute was not necessarily rhetorical. Six months earlier, the Governor of Limón had reassured his superiors in San José that he was "gathering information" on forty-eight "foreign" women, doubtless Jamaican in the majority, whom he was planning to deport for illegal prostitution. In practice, "gathering information" to prove clandestine prostitution meant finding neighbors who were willing to testify to the "bad conduct and character" of the woman in question.[20])

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[15]ANCR, LAU 510 (1902).

[16]ANCR, LAU 3406 (1906).

[17]ANCR, LAU 399 (1898); LAU 472 (1899).

[18]ANCR, LAU 3481 (1908). After several rounds of depositions, no further activity ensued in this case, suggesting the participants may have come to an agreement: whether the tubes were eventually paid for at ten cents or fifteen cents each, or not at all, we do not know.

[19]ANCR, LAU 3411 (1907).

[20]ANCR, Policía 1486, letter 8 August 1906. There is no record as to whether these women were actually deported, and prostitution regulation in Limón in these years was such a half-hearted, haphazard matter that it is quite possible they were not. For a further discussion of prostitution in Limón, see our unpublished essay, "Women of the Life: The Work and Lives of Prostitutes in Costa Rica's Atlantic Banana Zone, 1890-1925."

An ongoing dispute of a different sort apparently motivated the insults for which Jane Barnes sued Jerome Dabney, who had declared loudly at the door to her room: “Dam how Beach, I take you from Kingston naked, and I have to give you clothes to cover your ass, and you come in Limón to take man upon my catt, make your man buy mattress give you. But, if I even dead I will revenged you.”[21] In this case and the previous one, the imputations against the woman's sexual honor seem to stem logically from the substance of the conflict. But in fact, as we shall see, sexual dishonor was the idiom through which women's status was challenged and defended, no matter who the women were and no matter what the conflict was. Thus Matilda Thompson sued Edith MacLean for saying "that she was a 'whore,' that she was always getting money from a man to sleep with him, that when that man goes to her house, she shuts herself up with him and three others and they keep cohabiting until midnight." Queried about the parties to the case, the local justice of the peace reported that the two women were constantly in disputes stemming from a conflict over the title to a piece of land.[22]

Such long-running feuds could result in one or a series of slander cases. *Don* Lucas Alvarado—the former *Alcalde* who would be caned by *don* Eduardo Beeche in 1903—sued Salomón Zacarías Aguilera, a Colombian national and prominent Limón lawyer, for slander in 1901. Aguilera's most recent offense had been to compare Alvarado, in a writ for a court case in which the two men were opposing attorneys, to the vampire doctor stalking the innocent in a current moving picture. This, on top of innumerable "epithets typical of people of his class," wrote *don* Lucas, had finally prompted him to seek legal redress.[23]

In many slander cases, however, the public insults themselves became more significant than whatever ephemeral conflict had sparked them. Disputes over a few cents' change, at the pharmacy or the butcher's shop, lead to court cases in which the parties invested many times that amount.[24] Ethel Forbes sued Harold Franklin in 1902 after he called her "in English, 'Jamaica Bitch' which is to say in Spanish *jamaicana puta perra puta.*" His pre-paid laundry had not yet been ironed when he came to pick it up.[25] When Annie Maxwell tried to collect the money she had loaned her neighbor Berthina Taylor, Taylor yelled from the balcony of the boarding house where both lived "that I could get the money out of her ass because she didn't have it—rotten cunt—that the woman who like I (the deponent) has slept with *chinos*, is no good for other men;—that the money she owed she wouldn't pay because I had stolen it from a *chino*, a lover of mine; that is to say, referring to the deponent, that they had cut [my] hair in Jamaica, while in prison for having stolen money from a gentleman."[26]

This example—and numerous cases like it—highlights the relationship between built environment, social structure, and popular culture in Limón. Working folk in the port city lived either on the outskirts, in wooden shacks built on the public domain or rented plots, or in the center of town in boarding houses and multi-family dwellings. These, known as "casas de vecindad" or more crudely "chinchorros," were usually two-story buildings, in which lines of eight to ten single rooms opened onto a corridor along the first floor, and a balcony on the

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[21]ANCR, LAU 492 (1903). These insults were reported verbatim, in Jamaican creole, in Barnes' initial writ of complaint.
[22]ANCR, Serie Jurídica, Limón Juzgado Civil y del Crimen [LJCyC] 730 (1903).
[23]ANCR, LAU 546 (1901).
[24]See ANCR, LAU 466 (1900), LAU 544 (1901).
[25]ANCR, LAU 508 (1902). Franklin was from the United States. According to him, Forbes had prompted his retort by making comments about his "bastard daughter," to whom the clothes belonged. It seems likely that Franklin was one of the Afro-Americans employed as skilled mechanics and supervisors by the Northern Railway Company (a UFCo subsidiary).
[26]ANCR, LAU 477 (1900).

second.[27] In the patio behind the building there would be a standing water pipe, and sometimes a separate kitchen to reduce the risk of fires. Small one-room houses of corrugated iron or wood were often built beyond these back patios by the owners of the lots, and these were rented as well.

This aspect of the urban geography was described by Governor Daniel Víquez in 1910 as a menace to public authority:

> The centers of the city blocks form a second population, which those who visit the city briefly don't take into consideration because they do not see it, and it is precisely there that the greatest danger [of arson, in this case] exists. There live those who are lost to fortune or looking to economize; the front sides of the blocks are inhabited by the well-off, or occupied by storefronts. These dens of crime and misery are in darkness because the electric plant is not able to provide for all who request electricity… Each block has so many hidden alleys that the police cannot effectively watch them, and each of those is an escape route which mocks the policeman's good-faith attempt to exercise his duty.[28]

Official port doctor Benjamín Céspedes described similarly decrepit conditions, and placed the blame with the landlords who refuse to make urgent repairs "to improve their foul slum barracks which earn them as much as 2% per month from the resident niggers."[29]

The inner patios of the *casas de vecindad*, or the shared water pipes of the back lot shanties, became the locus of much of women's daily activities: in particular the cooking and washing they did for themselves, for kin, or for customers. Many slander cases had their origins in words shouted "from the *altos* [second floor]," from doorway to doorway, or through the partitions which separated rooms (a row of planks which often stopped several feet from the ceiling). Even more than the public market, it was the *casas de vecindad* which facilitated the informal economy of working women. They were the centers not only of laundry and food preparation but of money-lending, small-scale retailing, and services like dressmaking and hairdressing. Whatever the residents' wishes, in this setting there could be little distinction between public and private domains. Such a division had no spatial basis in a world in which only five flimsy boards separated your bed from your neighbors'; in which you literally washed your dirty linen in public; in which your financial borrowing power depended on your upstairs neighbor's opinion of the man you'd been keeping company with. In the *casas de vecindad* social networks, economic well-being, political connections, and intimate liaisons were all linked, and information and judgments about all of these came together in personal reputations.

It was not uncommon for a dozen or more neighbors to testify to a particular verbal battle they had all witnessed, giving versions that differed dramatically depending on whose side they had chosen to take. In a 1908 case, Roberta Thompson said she and her husband had been sitting peacefully in front of their door, when Edith Carter called out "Why is this bitch laughing at me, why don't you go to Jamaica and whore with the man you left behind there?," to which, one witness claimed, Thompson had responded "that she was a damned nothing, 'patio princess'." Other neighbors, testifying on Carter's behalf in the countersuit she filed, remembered a more colorful response: "that she was a whore all her life, that she had given birth in a chamber pot; that she smelled worse than chicken shit; that she was a shaved-head, no more than a vulgar

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[27]Louis Mennereck, "A Study of Puerto Limon, Costa Rica" [mimeo] (San José, Costa Rica: Associated Colleges of the Midwest Central American Field Program, 1964), 36. The word "chinchorro" comes from "chinche," a stinkbug similar to a cockroach.

[28]MGP 1910: 595.

[29]"… a mejorar sus infectos barracones que les produce en la negrada hasta el dos por ciento mensual." ANCR, Policía 1486, letter 2 October 1906.

woman of her class; and that if she didn't like it, she could take it to the judge."[30] Similarly intimate public conflicts occurred among Costa Rican and Central American boarding-house tenants. The conflict between Costa Rican Vicenta Hernández, and Isabel Montoya, a Nicaraguan 18-year-old, began in the public market with insults and accusations of malicious gossip involving several other women as well, carried over into a string of insults in their shared patio (including the classic repartee, "She said *'tu madre'* to which I replied *'la tuya'*"), and concluded with Hernández declaring, in front of Montoya's consensual male partner "that I am a whore, so low that I whore with *chinos.*"[31]

In the tight quarters of boarding house life, struggles over status sometimes became actual fights over public space, and the attempt to "keep someone in her place" was literally enacted. One morning in 1900, Amelia Esquivel, a Colombian woman and the consensual partner of cantina owner Isidor Asch, nailed a canvas sheet along the corridor to prevent Maud MacPherson from walking past, saying "that filthy whores like her could not pass here." Meanwhile MacPherson walked back and forth, milk jug in one arm and baby in the other, daring Esquivel to stop her and taunting "that if she was dirty it was from caring for her one husband and her child" (implying that Esquivel was morally dirty for living with Asch). "One Colombian woman there was urging Amelia to hit [MacPherson], but Amelia instead brought out her chamber pot as a sign of disrespect and put it in front of Maud saying that she should talk to the chamber pot, that she [Esquivel] didn't want more trouble." A hard-fought criminal case ensued, which lasted for over a year and was finally appealed beyond the Supreme Court to the *Sala de Casación* [Final Court of Appeal]. As this case shows, in the heterogeneous residential and commercial spaces of city blocks standing was at times challenged and defended across ethnic lines. Esquivel spoke little English and MacPherson no Spanish: bystanders and partisans had translated for each throughout (although Esquivel's attorney, *don* Lucas Alvarado, wrote of MacPherson that "she knows how to swear well enough in Spanish, and besides which *señor Alcalde*, anyone who hears "God Dam Son of a Bitch" [in English in original] knows he's been called *hijo de una perra*, even school children know that").[32]

Esquivel belonged to a category of women clearly over-represented among slander plaintiffs: women who ran cantinas owned by their male consensual partners.[33] The line between cantinas and brothels was blurry, as was the line between a materially advantageous consensual union and commercial sex. In short such female entrepreneurs were sometimes former prostitutes themselves, and were always suspected of being so. Their honor was precarious, and perhaps hard-won, and they defended it with a vengeance. Ramona Méndez sued Fidel Gómez for slander in 1907, because when she refused to served him 20 *céntimos* of cane liquor on credit he yelled "very loudly that I couldn't cure a burn I have on my hand, because I had been the concubine of *chinos* and was syphilitic." The offense occurred while she was supervising the cantina owned by Ramón Sárraga—with whom, she emphasized, "I have lived honorably and maritally for more than three years."[34] Similarly, when Josefa Morales tried to collect "a little bill for meals I had prepared" in *El Rincón Bellaco* (a local brothel, literally "The Rogues' Corner"), debtor Petra Solórzano responded angrily "that at least she was not as low as I, who slept with *chinos*, that she would rather sleep with four *negros* before doing so with one *chino*." According to witnesses, Solórzano was a working prostitute, and Morales was a woman of good

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[30]ANCR, LAU 3487 (1908).
[31]ANCR, LAU 3494 (1908).
[32]ANCR, LAU 460 (1900).
[33]ANCR, LAU 522 (1901), LAU 409 (1898), LAU 426 (1899), LAU 460 (1900), LAU 447 (1900), LAU 3417 (1907). In our sample, such cases make up the majority of suits with Latin American female plaintiffs.
[34]ANCR, LAU 3417 (1907).

conduct. Morales took Solórzano to court.[35] Arabella Goldson sued Isaac León for slander in 1899 (both were Jamaican). She had served León a drink "in my cantina establishment in the ground floor of the Hotel Arnold… He brought the glass to his nose and then said that those of us working there were 'dirty' and that I in addition was 'a daughter of a whore,' 'damned' 'a prostituted *mulata'* 'whore' and other expressions which offend modesty and I will not pronounce." León's lawyer countered by promissing to prove through witnesses that "Arabella Goldson is an unmarried woman and she has lived for more than four years with [cantina owner] José Delphos," who had abandoned his wife and children in Jamaica on her behalf. (Soon after this writ was filed, Goldson decided to settle out of court.)[36]

Accusations of prostitution undercut the rising social and economic status of female entrepreneurs in the profitable liquor-and-entertainment sector, and prompted vigorous responses. It seems harder to explain the frequent slander suits filed by individual prostitutes themselves, in which they claimed that their honor and reputation had been damaged by people (more often than not other "public women") who had called them whores. In 1906 Martha Darling sued Bell Brown and Jessie Smith for publicly insulting her in a port brothel known as Noah's Ark. Brown had declared "that Martha Darling had stolen clothing in Jamaica and in the market on said island had stolen yams and hidden them up her ass." When Martha replied in kind, Jessie said to Bell "I'm your cousin and no one can insult you, much less Martha Darling who I've know for a thieving whore since Jamaica."[37] The following year Darling sued a couple for slander, claiming that when she had attempted to collect some money they owed her, Samuel Brown said "Here is your money damned bitch" and Wilhemina Brown had added, "You can't talk to me, because when you go to the Lines you execute carnal acts in the banana fields like a female dog."[38] Two years later Darling was visiting the above-mentioned Jessie Smith in a different brothel and got into a fight with one Mary Jane Brooks, calling her a "rotten-assed whore who was full of putrefaction." This time Brooks sued Darling, and Smith testified in her former adversary's defense.[39]

How can we understand the apparent contradiction of prostitutes filing legal suit to restore the honor they claim was injured when other prostitutes accused them of being prostitutes? The answer illuminates the dynamics of slander accusations as a whole. As the cases presented above demonstrate, slander accusations frequently grew out of public slanging matches similar to those described by anthropologists from across the Caribbean. This was a street theater of personal honor, fueled by righteous indignation and animated by the aesthetics of verbal artistry. Slander accusations were brought by folks who felt they had been bested in such public battles for prestige. It was a way to trump one's opponent, to continue the same argument by other means.[40] By taking the case to the *Alcalde*, the plaintiff proved that she or he had the money or connections necessary to carry a case through criminal system. Or at least she bluffed that she was willing to do so. One could place an accusation orally for free, or pay the cost of single lawyer's writ, but the costs for both parties grew heavier as the case moved on. To

[35]ANCR, LAU 522 (1901).
[36]ANCR, LAU 426 (1899).
[37]ANCR, LAU 3398 (1906).
[38]ANCR, LAU 3485 (1907).
[39]ANCR, LAU 3495 (1908).
[40]Lazarus-Black offers a nuanced ethnographic account of popular use of courts (and the performance possibilities they provide) in Mindie Lazarus-Black, *Legitimate Acts and Illegal Encounters: Law and Society in Antigua and Barbuda* (Washington, D.C. and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), esp. Ch. 8.

file for slander proved that one was willing and able to raise the ante.[41] Indeed, bragging about one's ability to afford to carry cases through the courts became part of the standard repartee of public insults. An extreme case is that of Roberta Thompson, "patio princess," who apparently kept former municipal judge Enrique Jiménez Dávila on retainer for just such occasions. According to one neighbor, she "makes a habit of insulting her neighbors, bragging that she has money, and has already paid a lawyer for the year to carry her defense."[42]

Furthermore, the act of mobilizing supporting witnesses flexed the muscle of the parties' social support. The process of "putting witnesses," calling on onlookers to testify on one's behalf in a court case, seems to have become a ritual part of public verbal duels. Typical is the mention in the case between Hermione Edwards and Letitia Phillips in 1898. Edwards and her friend Leonore Goodman had been sitting in the corridor outside one of the port's biggest stores, talking "about the bad state of business," when Phillips interjected, "What are you going on about, don't you remember the time [when things were so bad that] you stole yams from that *coolie* and hid them under your bed?" Edwards said to Goodman, "What do you think of that offense?" and Goodman replied "that she should not get angry, but just go to the authorities, and so she did, she put witnesses and didn't answer Phillips back."[43]

To sue for slander opened a new forum for conflict and occasioned a repetition of the original public performance, as participants and witnesses came forward to repeat lines from the first engagement. But the valences attached to statements were crucially different in this forum, in many ways reversed. Cleverly detailed insults counted against speaker; sexual boasting lowered your standing in the eyes of the law. Thus in 1901 the Barbadian carpenter Alexander Barnes sued "Mistress French" on behalf of his wife, saying she had "accused his wife of having illicit relations with one 'Barefoot,' a neighbor of French's." His wife, who identified herself pointedly as Cassandra Maxwell *de* Barnes, included a copy their marriage certificate as part of her formal complaint. Her writ of accusation declared that "since the act which was imputed to me consists of a grave slander, as I am a married woman and this could bring about the dissolution of my tranquil home and bring down the wrath of my husband, I come before you *señor Alcalde* to demand restitution for my injured honor [etc. etc.]…" Yet the substance of the

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[41]Over 60% of the 159 total participants in our sample had legal representation, which ranged from the purchase of a single-page writ of complaint, which the client herself presented at the *alcaldía*, to specifying a lawyer's office for the receipt of subsequent notifications (and presumably getting legal advice on the decisions thus notified), to officially registering an "apoderado," who was then legally empowered to act on one's behalf. According to the legal bills included in the occasional debt recovery proceedings stemming from unpaid legal debts, lawyers charged a few colones for each writ, plus a lesser amount for the necessary legal paper and stamps. It is clear that lawyers made a variety of arrangements with different clients, including a range of quid-pro-quos and patron-client ties. In those cases which were actually pursued at length, lawyers appear to have been working on spec: this is suggested by the size of the honorariums charged as part of the adjudicated costs. Of the 74 cases in our sample, 40 were not pursued by the parties after the first complaint was made or, in some cases, the first round of witnesses testified; 12 were ended by the parties through an extrajudicial accord. (For the majority of those cases which settled out of court there is no record of a monetary accord. The remaining one-third of them settled for costs so far: ¢9 in one case, between ¢31-77 in the others.) Twelve cases were carried through to the point of "enjuiciamento" and then dismissed by the judge for lack of evidence or because the insults had been "reciprocal and thus compensated." Only 10 cases actually reached judgment, and in at least half of these, the accused was absolved (for two of these cases the outcome is unclear). So all told less than 5% of accusations ended in conviction. According to the legal code, the minimum sentence for "injurias graves" was 2 months jail time or ¢100 fine, plus costs. In one of the two cases for which costs claims are preserved, the plaintiff's lawyer charged ¢9.75 for assorted writs, declarations taken, and stamps, and ¢200 for his honorarium. In another victorious case that same year, the same lawyer charged a ¢100 honorarium. ANCR, LAU 529 (1901); LAU 549 (1901). A day laborer in these years earned between ¢1.50-4 per day, and rooms in boarding houses rented for around ¢10 per month.

[42]ANCR, LAU 3487 (1908).

[43]ANCR, LAU 408 (1898).

alleged insults takes on a rather different tinge in the testimony of Barnes' own witnesses. Apparently Barnes had gone to another woman's room in order to purchase some yams and Mistress French, who happened to be visiting, had announced, "My man [*mi marido o concubino*] John Belfore can get any married woman he wants with that yam of his."[44]

While strong parallels for such incidents can be found in the ethnographic literature on "slanging matches" in Providencia, "cussing out" in Barbuda, "tracings" in Jamaica, or "the dozens" among Afro-Americans in the U.S., they were not an exclusively Afro-Caribbean phenomenon in Limón.[45] Migrants from every area participated in the street culture of confrontation. Mistress French's comment is a classic example of one of the few clear ethnic differences in the substance of slander accusations: West Indian women's creative references to male and female anatomy ("My husband slipped you a yam and a bit of coal;" "Your ass is so worn from whoring that you need to buy a new one;" "When you were in Jamaica you stole *mondongo* [tripe] in the market and hid it in your brassier."[46]) But in general, even the specific content of insults was quite similar across groups. For instance, not only did Nicaraguans, Costa Ricans, and Jamaicans all use "whoring with *chinos*" as emblematic of the worst female degradation, but among all groups insults having to do with Chinese men were most commonly uttered by debtors confronted with their inability to pay.[47] Indeed the same connection between Chinese men, sexual degeneracy, and bad debts was evidence in numerous insults cases involving prostitutes in San José in these same years. When Vicenta Salazar tried to collect from Agustina Cabrera and her daughters the ¢3 they owed her, one of the teens called Salazar "a big-mouthed, thieving whore" and swore "that her sister Angelina was better than Vicenta Salazar because no one had ever seen her with *chinos* ," while Angelina called Salazar a *"mamona y culiola"* [woman who engages in oral and anal sex] and repeated "that even *chinos* had had anal sex with her."[48] Likewise, a slander accusation between two female minors in San José in 1906 stemmed from the claim "that I was a whore and that I had been caught out in a *cafetal* [coffee field] with men," echoing the association of illicit sexuality and spatial transgression in Wilhemina Davis' claim that Martha Darling "goes into the *bananales* and has sex like a dog."[49]

What are we to make of the similarity of slander content across migrants of every origin in Limón, and more generally the similar strategies through which they sought to affirm their public standing? Contemporary observers from both sides insisted that West Indians and Costa Ricans were culturally different, and that that difference had much to do with appropriate gender roles, domestic arrangements, and sexual morality.[50] As we shall see, such convictions had real impact on the public politics of race in Limón, and on the future of the region and its populace in the wake of the banana boom. But that contemporary conviction of difference, and its political salience, has served to mask the real similarities between the cultural heritage of the two regions.

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[44]ANCR, LAU 537 (1901).

[45]Wilson, *Crab Antics*; Cooper, *Noises in the Blood*; Riva Berleant-Schiller and William M. Maurer, "Women's Place is Every Place: Merging Domains and Women's Roles in Barbuda and Dominica," In Janet Momsen, ed., *Women and Change in the Caribbean: A Pan-Caribbean Perspective* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993): 76.

[46]ANCR, Serie Jurídica, Limón Juzgado del Crimen [LJCrim] 297 (1911); ANCR, LAU 3472 (1907).

[47]Other examples are ANCR, LAU 3494 (1908), LAU 422 (1899), LAU 522 (1901), LAU 3417 (1907), LAU 422 (1899), LAU 3441 (1909), LAU 3467 (1908), LAU 3494 (1908); ANCR Serie Jurídica, San José Alcaldía Primera [SJA1] 1770 (1906); ANCR, Policía 2198 (1897), Policía 2973 (1901). We suspect this reflects in part the role of Chinese men in small-scale commerce across the country. For many working-class people, the "pulpería del chino" was their closest connection to merchant capital—and a site of unending petty debt.

[48]ANCR, SJA1 1770 (1906).

[49]ANCR, SJA1 1781 (1907); ANCR, LAU 3485 (1907).

[50]See our essay "Ideología Racial, Práctica Social y Estado Liberal," *Revista de Historia* (San José, Costa Rica) 1998: forthcoming.

These similarities were in turn accentuated by the self-selection of migrants to the zone. The uncertain prospects of the banana boom did not draw all potential workers evenly: it took a certain degree of "facetyness" simply to arrive, whether from Kingston, Colón, or Cartago. In addition the built environment of the city—particularly the architecture of the *casas de vecindad*—favored certain social developments for migrants of both groups. Specifically, it enhanced the importance of female social networks and the informal economy associated with them; and thrust intimate relationships into the public domain.

In one sense even the judicially-sanctioned version of female honor was not so distant from those espoused by Martha Darling and the Cabrera sisters. Honor for women meant sexual propriety. It was simply the definition of sexual propriety which varied. In the letter of law, sexual propriety meant fidelity to a lawfully wedded husband; in the gender ideology embodied in a Central American proverb, it meant that "the decent woman leaves her house only to be baptized, to be married, and to be buried"; on the streets of Limón, it meant not sleeping with *chinos* for cash (or not cohabiting with three men at once in the kitchen, or not having sex in the *bananales*…).[51] Both Afro-Caribbean and Latin American popular cultures drew on European traditions as developed in colonial caste societies, in which elite male privilege included sexual freedom, and poor women's vulnerabilities included sexual vulnerability. Thus when the working-class women who participated in public verbal duels laid claim to personal status, they did so by asserting their sexual autonomy. They claimed sexual virtue not as virgins, but as subjects who acted on their own moral discriminations.

In contrast for upper class women, and indeed women of any group who sought to emulate the vision of sexual propriety expressed in the proverb above, merely to appear on the streets except under certain ritualized circumstances was to relinquish claims to sexual propriety. This version of female honor was captured in a lawyer's reference to a wealthy Costa Rica woman in Limón, inadvertent witness to a conflict between two workers outside her door: "As the señora Ana de González is of good character [*buenas costumbres*] and does not frequent public offices, I beg you to go and receive her declaration in her own home."[52] There is evidence that some working-class and middle-class families in highland Costa Rica, and in the Caribbean as well, sought to ensure family honor through a similar strategy of female seclusion. But by and large the women of such families were not the ones who ended up in Limón—and when they did, it was because they had already renounced that particular approach to female prestige.[53]

In this context it is worth noting that while Costa Rican women have only a small presence in our arbitrary sample of slander cases, there were in fact a significant number of slander accusations placed by Costa Rican women in the cities of the central valley, and some in Limón as well. Many times the plaintiffs, like the Cabrera sisters above, were "mujeres públicas." Such "public women"—like peddlers and market women in Limón, like men everywhere—claimed the right to occupy public space. They did so loudly and aggressively, in battles against each other as well as against the policemen and hygiene officers who tried to regulate their lives. (A classic example of prostitutes' rowdy street culture was a brawl involving a dozen women in San José one evening in 1892. The conflict originated in a verbal battle between two madams over whose establishment an ambulatory player-piano would play outside of next, and ended with several knife wounds and multiple arrests.)[54]

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[51]Whisnant reports the same proverb for Nicaragua. David E. Whisnant, *Rascally Signs in Sacred Places: The Politics of Culture in Nicaragua* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), Ch. 10.
[52]ANCR, LAU 3406 (1906).
[53]Such trajectories are evidenct in the life stories of various women from the central valley who became prostitutes in the banana zone. See our essay, "Women of the Life," op cit.
[54]ANCR, Serie Jurídica, San José Juzgado del Crimen [SJJCrim] 1621 (1892).

At the beginning of this essay, in our analysis of the participants in our sample of slander cases, we noted the apparent paradox that such cases were filed by the lowest of women and the highest of men. What these groups had in common was their use of public space for personal conflicts. In each case, the streets served as settings for individual conflicts within the group, while at the same time the very claim to a street presence was a collective act with political implications. Harry Franck captured this dynamic quite well in his description of the politics of public space in Kingston in the 1910s (in his view, the forces of good were losing ground):

> Loose-mannered black females ply their trade with perfect impunity, shrieking worse than indecencies at unresponsive passers-by… The white residents of Kingston seem to live in fear of the black multitude that makes up the great bulk of the population. When hoodlums and rowdies jostle them in the street, they shift aside with a slinking air; even when the black hooligans cling to the outside of street-cars pouring out obscene language, the white men do not shield their wives and daughters beside them by so much as raising their voices in protest. When cursing, filthy market women pile their baskets and unwashed produce in upon them and crowd their own women out of their places, they bear it all with humble resignation, as if they were the last survivors of the civilized race wholly disheartened by an invasion of barbarian tribes.[55]

Franck's perception of this public battle is confirmed by a similar description from a quite different source: the rendering by Jamaican poet Louise Bennet of a market woman's comment overheard on a crowded Kingston bus in the 1930s.

> Pread out yuhself de Liza,
> one Dress-oman dah look like seh
> She see di li space side-a we
> And wan foce harself een deh.[56]

The market women physically spread themselves out, leaving no room for the middle-class interloper (derided as a "one-dress woman") to squeeze into their domain at the back of the bus.

One component of Caribbean women's assertive occupation of public space was the aggressive display of sexuality that so troubled Harry Franck in the "loose-mannered females" of Kingston. As Cooper writes of dance-hall culture, "Slackness is not just sexual looseness—though it certainly is that. Slackness is a metaphorical revolt against law and order; an undermining of the consensual standards of decency."[57] Similar social dynamics are suggested by the report of the governor of San José in 1890 that "public women, forgetting the need for social respect and forgetting their own despised position, live today more than ever given over to the most scandalous prostitution."[58] It is unlikely that *josefina* prostitutes "forgot" the stigma attached to their way of life: rather, they chose actively and loudly to ignore it. The public self-assertion of certain Costa Rican women—some of whom earned their livings from commercial sex—in both the Central Valley and in Limón was not just a deviation from patriarchal norms. A raucous attitude of entitlement, was the modal form of public deportment for a significant number of working-class women. Again, these parallels belie the fixity of regional cultural difference, and call our attention instead to the role of social structure in shaping individual demeanor.

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[55]Harry A. Franck, *Roaming Through the West Indies* (New York: The Century Co., 1923), 405.

[56]Cooper, *Noises in the Blood* 41. Cooper comments, "This literal spreading out of self is an evocative metaphor for the irrepressible survival instincts of Jamaica's dispossed who refuse to be squeezed out of existence. The amplitude of the body becomes a figure for the verbal expansiveness that is often the only weapon of the politically powerless; tracings and other forms of verbal abuse are essential armaments in class warfare."

[57]Cooper, *Noises in the Blood,* 141.

[58]MGP 1890, unpaged.

But all was not slackness in the streets of Limón. The popular occupation of public space incorporated cultural forms borrowed widely, including many more often associated with middle-class respectability than with lower-class reputation. Travelers often commented on West Indian women's fondness for haberdashery. George Putnam described women on the 6 a.m. local train to Zent Junction, returning to the lines after visits to the port and its stores. "One buxom coloured lassie was envied much in the eyes of her sisters, thanks to a vivid hat of rainbow hues and broad scope which she bore proudly on her head, while in her hand she carried the discarded creation of the last season."[59] Such descriptions shade to parody as Euro-American authors try to laugh off the travesty of Jamaican Negresses dressed as proper ladies.[60] But perhaps the women themselves were the original parodists. They appropriated the symbols of bourgeois respectability in a manner potentially subversive, but more importantly stylish. Wallace Thompson's first impression upon docking in Limón was of "A large, very dusky lady, gaudy in green satin, and smoking of the immortal 'whopping big cheroot,' … selling native candies."[61] This peddler not only mixed male and female symbols of bourgeois privilege (the dress, the cigar), but did so within an aesthetic of sensual pleasure that was anything but respectable (the color and texture of the satin, the indulgence of the tobacco).

Candy-sellers aside, the docks were mainly the province of male workers, and masculine display. All accounts agree that West Indian longshoremen sang as they loaded the outgoing ships. Adams describes dusk on the docks of Limón, as the "fat negro 'mammies'" peddling sweatmeats "light torches and Chinese lanterns… and the myriad lights of the ship add their glow to the general effect."

> The young negro who lead the singing of one of the deck gangs had a rarely sympathetic tenor voice, and scores of passengers crowded about the rail and applauded the rendition of "Blest Be the Tie that Binds," "Sweet Hour of Prayer," "Nearer, My God, to Thee," "Rock of Ages," and other songs familiar and loved by all, irrespective of religious inclinations, but most often sung by Methodists.
> On the opposite end of the ship was a rival concert, but at times some singer with a powerful voice would sound a strain which would ring clear above the hum and racket of the conveyor machinery and the shunting of trains, and the workers from end to end of ship and dock would join in. On the night which I am attempting to describe, a huge Jamaican negro took artistic advantage of a slight lull in the noise. He was black as night, with huge shoulders and massive torso. For hours he had been handling seventy-pound bunches of bananas as if they were bouquets. In a splendidly modulated baritone voice he suddenly began the second verse of "Nearer, My God, to Thee":
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> "Though like a wanderer, the sun gone down,
> Darkness be over me, my rest a stone;
> Still in my dreams I'll be,
> Nearer, my God, to Thee—

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[59]George Putnam, *The Southland of North America: Rambles and Observations in Central America during the Year 1912* (New York: G.P. Putnam & Sons, 1914), 109.

[60]This is true even of those observers more inclined to sympathy than vitrol, as in Winifred James' description of Sunday morning on the outskirts of Kingston: "They came out of their little houses and shanties, behind the dildoe hedges, where they sleep *over* the bed and *under* the bed and as near to the bed as they can get; as trim and clean and tidy as if each woman had a suite of apartments and a maid for her own private use, instead of living eight and ten in a room. Flowery hats, of exceeding hideousness but trim and faultlessly neat, set on black wool tortured into imposing puffs and rolls and bulges; beads round the neck, bangles on the wrist and earrings hanging from under the wool frizzes. And eternally and inevitably, transparent lace blouses, through the open work of which gleam their chocolate graces like a fine brown scroll-work. So they march in ones and twos and threes portentously, majestically, to the little church with jalousied windows from whose wooden tower the bell is clanging…" Winifred James, *The Mulberry Tree* (London: Chapman and Hall, Ltd., 1913), 56-7.

[61]Wallace Thompson, *The Rainbow Countries of Central America* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1926), 15.

Nearer, my God, to Thee, nearer to Thee."[62]

The dock workers' nightly performance was a vocal "spreading out" paralleling Bennet's market women's physical one. It was of a piece with their claims to public space at other moments, as George Putnam described in 1907: "Just before daylight the next morning we heard those workers going home, when the ship was loaded and underway. A more varied or unearthly conglomeration of sound than that produced by a pack of paid-off Jamaicans, with the work day behind them, it is impossible to imagine."[63] The dock-side hymns were the object of paternalist approval, while the rowdy retreat met racist disdain, but there is no reason to think the workers themselves drew any such distinction. For these young men, who had traveled far to earn decent wages for back-breaking labor, both the songs and the streets were occasions for individual virtuosity, for manly competition, for boisterous communal pride.

The public displays organized by high-status men were certainly less tuneful, but often just as loud. By "local elites" we refer not to those ranking UFCo officials who would move on once their tour of duty was over, but to the handful of wealthy and well-connected residents who had made fortunes in the region, and sought to make more. Such men included Costa Ricans as well as immigrants from Colombia, Cuba, North America, and Europe, many of whom married into prestigious Costa Rican families. Their wealth and political activism went hand in hand, since the national and local governments controlled almost all potential sources of income not already in the possession of the United Fruit Company—in particular, land concessions and municipal contracts. Court documents and internal government correspondence record intra-elite battles as boisterous, public, and vindictive as those of any *casa de vecindad.* Elites' economic and kin-based alliances were institutionalized in party structures, and because their rituals of public assertion involved "fiestas cívicas" and electoral tallies in addition to cussing out and ritual shaming, the political nature of their conflicts have been comparatively easier to see. But like the popular struggles embodied in slander cases, elite conflicts were expressed in the idiom of gendered honor; were fought out in public with words and occasionally with blows; and united social connections, economic leverage, and personal prestige.

Limón's elite rivalries were unusually personalistic and rowdy, even by the standards of the day. In the words of one exasperated governor, "If anywhere in this country there's a big ants' nest, it's here."[64] Conflict was endemic between the centrally-appointed governors and the locally-elected *regidores* [municipal chiefs], whose cycles of collusion and obstinacy with regard to the United Fruit Co. rarely seemed to coincide. In general the local elites who controlled the municipality identified their own interests with those of the Company, while the central government periodically adopted a more oppositional stance.[65] The dynamics of the regional

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[62]Frederick Upham Adams, *Conquest of the Tropics: The Story of the Creative Enterprises Conducted by the United Fruit Company* (New York: Doubleday, 1914), 183, 192.

[63]Putnam, *The Southland of North America ,*108

[64]ANCR, Policía 1567, letter 11 March 1907.

[65]For example, in the 1909 presidential election campaign Minor Keith gave financial and other support to Rafael Iglesias, candidate of the Partido Civil, because Partido Republicano candidate Ricardo Jiménez had denounced the most recent government contract with the United Fruit Company as a congressman several years earlier. Some of the nature of the "other support" Keith provided is indicated by the election results for that year. While Jiménez won 71% of the popular vote nationally, he won only 24% of the vote in Limón. Limón, the province with the smallest number of electors apportioned (33 all together, as opposed to 288 for the province of San José), accounted for over a third of the Civilistas' paltry 81 electoral votes nationwide. See Orlando Salazar Mora, *El apogeo de la República Liberal en Costa Rica (1870-1914)* (San José, Costa Rica: Editorial de la Universidad de Costa Rica, 1990), 155, 230-1. Not surprisingly, there were widespread accusations of fraud (see various telegrams from September - October 1909 in ANCR Policía 1594). One of the few works to deal systematically with the role of

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