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# The Decline of the White Idiosyncratic: Racialization and Otherness in Costa Rica

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## Comments

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**The Decline of the White Idiosyncratic: Racialization and  
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Abstract: This paper employs comparative historical analysis to trace the development of shifting notions of otherness and changes in the racialization of Nicas and Afro-Costa Ricans over time. I find that both Afro-Costarrican and Nicaraguan minority groups have been central to the national identity, albeit in distinct ways. Racialized comparisons between “dark-skinned” Nicaraguans and “white” Costa Ricans, has created a third way in the Costa Rican context, where traditionally mestizo Nicaraguan immigrants become darkened or “blackened” and Afro-Costa Ricans are simultaneously privileged and disadvantaged as localized and preferred others.

Costa Rica has long been synonymous with uniqueness, peace, purity, and whiteness; at least in its own self-image. All of these signifiers establish its difference with its more problematic Central American counterparts. They also belie Costa Rica's own internal diversity. In the image that Costa Rica (attempts) to portray to the world, and perhaps more importantly, to itself, black, Chinese, indigenous, and Nicaraguan populations disappear from the national scene to be replaced by an idealistic and white-washed nation. This uniqueness is widely held to stem from Costa Rica's commitment to social democracy, which functions on the basis of egalitarianism. In reality, this 'uniqueness' is predicated on a discourse of whiteness that has interpellated two major sets of 'others,' blacks and *nicas* into the national identity project in distinct ways.

I argue that both minority groups are necessary to a cohesive national identity in distinct ways. Both populations have suffered from racism and discrimination, but Afro-Costarricans became increasingly necessary to the nation and its social democratic experiment after 1948.<sup>1</sup> They, along with women, were the foundational groups on which the experiment had to proceed, showing that Costa Rica could function on the basis of class differences alone, and that all other forms of difference, *could* be eradicated. In this sense the Afro-Costarrican other functions entirely within the sphere of whiteness in its expanded sense. That is, a notion of whiteness that rests not so much on phenotype and biology, but on culture, peacefulness, and democraticness. Hence, Afro-Costarricans serve a political purpose within the Costa Rican context. Historically the more manifest forms of racism against them appear to be as equally motivated by political and economic concerns as by identity concerns. After 1948 the focus on them is also manifestly

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<sup>1</sup> Black Costarricans were primarily described as West Indian prior to the Costa Rican civil war, at which point the terms black, black Costarrican, negro, and later Afro-Costarrican came into greater usage. I will use black, black Costarrican, and negro interchangeably. West Indian shall always refer to the first half of the twentieth century; Afro-Costarrican to the latter.

political. As they shifted from temporary migrants to permanent residents they become central to Figueres' social democratic experiment. Blacks function as an other that make Costa Ricans more white.

Nicas have also played a central role in the Costa Rican national image, but in an opposite way.<sup>2</sup> Certainly some of the opposition to them stems from the same basis as the opposition to Afro-Costarricans earlier in the twentieth century. There is concern that they are taking jobs that rightly belong to nationals. But more than this, the issue with nicas appears to be twofold. First, they function as scapegoats to a larger issue, which is the decline of the Costa Rican welfare state. Frustration with the state's obvious inability to continue its expansionary aims on a pace concurrent with that of the 1960s and 1970s, and the decline in services and middle-class expansion that this contraction necessitates is pushed primarily onto the current other, the nicas. Hence the nicas represent the same type of threat that worried Clodomiro Picado (2004: 244) in 1939 when he proclaimed "OUR BLOOD IS BLACKENING! If blacks function as an other that can make 'regular' Costa Ricans whiter; nicas function as an other that blacken everyone.

This essay proceeds on the basis of a comparative historical analysis of the construction of whiteness counterposed to black and nica otherness in the Costa Rican polity. After a brief discussion of theories of whiteness, I move on to address whiteness and uniqueness specifically in the Costa Rican context as it manifests in policy and attitudes towards blacks and nicas in the social democratic experiment.

## Whiteness

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<sup>2</sup> Nica has become a derogatory term used specifically to describe Nicaraguan migrants of the post 1990 period. Nicas are distinct from both previous Nicaraguan migrants, Nicaraguan refugees of the Sandinista war, and Nicaraguans – those individuals of Nicaraguan nationality who are not thought to drain resources from Costa Rica, e.g. businesspeople and the middle-class.

Whiteness studies have increased significantly since the 1990s, in two distinct settings. That literature which stems from the American political context portrays whiteness as a meta-narrative or master frame explicates relationships of race, politics, economics, and culture. Scholarly inquires into the construction of whiteness dovetailed with growing interest in the making of majorities within a variety of national settings. Scholars such as David Roediger (1991) and Noel Ignatiev (1996) provided compelling histories of the expansion of whiteness to cover ethnic groups previously identified as various minorities and as very obviously not white.

Others take more contemporary approaches to whiteness; portraying it primarily as invisible and as a form of skin privilege in contemporary American society (Frankenberg 1993; McIntosh 1988). Whiteness functions under the radar, acting as a neutral and unrecognized component of identity. In this sense “blackness becomes conflated with being oppressed and whiteness is conflated with the privilege of ‘normalcy’” (Twine 1996: 215). This normalcy and lack of recognition are thought to define white culture, which is conflated with majority culture. Because of this white/majority culture is thought to be defined as indistinct and empty (Lipsitz 2006; Roediger 1991). Conley (2001: 25) concurs; “Ask any African American to list the adjectives that describe him, and he will most likely put black or African American at the top of the list. Ask someone of European descent the same question, and white will be far down on the list, if at all.”

Yet the notion that whiteness is empty rests on at least two problematic assumptions: that culture only belongs to racial groups, and that clear lines differentiate racialized peoples internally and externally (Rasmussen et. al 2001: 11). It is difficult to sustain such assumptions within a Latin American context. Perhaps the most useful cross-national application of critical whiteness theories is the recognition that whiteness is contextual and dialogical. Whiteness has

been equally central in the Latin American context, whether via processes of mestizaje or whitening (Garner 2007; Wade 1997; Whitten and Torres 1998). Studies of whitening projects in Latin American and its eventual ramifications are abundant (Andrews 2004; Hanchard 1994; Skidmore 1974; Yashar 2005). Often taken to mean the physical process of race mixture and lightening, whitening can be taken as a much wider project, denoted as the process of becoming “more urban, more Christian, more civilized, less rural, less black, less indian . . .” (Whitten 1981: 15 quoted in Wade 1997: 84). National projects to whiten the nation have varied in terms of their form, success, and extent. Costa Rica is often perceived as one of the more ‘successful’ cases. I turn to it now.

Costarricense, por dicha<sup>3</sup>

While Costa Rica is often cited as the Switzerland of Central America, much of its ‘success’ in the creation of a white or homogenous nations has been self-proclaimed (Sandoval 2004a; Molina 2003). Yet, the notion of whitening as both racial and, perhaps more importantly, cultural is central to the Costa Rican context and is recognized both domestically and internationally. Imagined ethnic homogeneity has been a part of Costa Rica almost from its foundation (Palmer and Molina 2004). Skin color and race as a phenotypical or biological characteristic or, “the white myth of racial purity,” carries a great deal of weight in Costa Rican society (Gudmundson 1986; Harpelle 2001). Early definitions of the nation emphasized the racial purity of Costa Rican society, predicated on patterns of rural yeoman farmers and white descended ancestors (Harpelle 2001; Lascaris 1994; Monge Alfaro 1941). Yet, most studies of national identity emphasize the importance of a number of other characteristics as well. Costa

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<sup>3</sup> Costarricense, por dicha, or Costarrican, thank goodness is a common phrase in Costa Rica which stems from colonial times. It is also the title of 2002 book by Iván Molina.

Rica is defined not simply as white, or ethnically homogenous, but also as peaceful and democratic. It is imagined as “lovely tropical arcade, white, rural, egalitarian, and with issues of gender clearly defined . . . (Molina 2002: 111).

Homogeneity is key to Costa Rica’s self image, indeed to its societal ethos (Monestel 2005). Yet, this homogeneity is not limited to physical whiteness. Instead it is geared around Costa Rica’s “idiosyncrasies,” those traits that both define the nation and differentiate it from the violent and backwards Central American other (Mitchell and Pentzer 2008; Sandoval 2004a). Its whiteness is defining and excessive. “Modern Costa Rica has been publicly regarded as a ‘white’ country in contrast to the rest of Latin America. Its general demographics and predominant culture reinforce the image of Costa Rica as not only European but more particularly as the *most* Caucasian, Castilian, and Catholic country in Central America” (Purcell 1993: xi; emphasis mine).

Indeed, Costa Rican identity has undergone an updating process whereby peace and democracy have come to define it as much as physical racial purity. As Sandoval notes “national identities in Costa Rica have been characterized by essentialist representations that highlight an idyllic sense of the past, a ‘white’ population, and recently a prosperous middle-class and a stable democracy as key sources of belonging (2004b: xviii-xiv). Hence, Costa Rican exceptionalism has broadened to encompass key political characteristics. Important rejoinders notwithstanding, popular faith in social democracy was the successful result of the civil war of 1948. As a result, the only reasonable basis for distinction is thought to be class difference. Hence whiteness has been broadened, theoretically, to include all who conform to notions of culture, class, and civility.



This broadening of whiteness, as had interesting and important ramifications for Costa Rica's two major groups of others: blacks and nicas. As a result of this broadening, both groups have shifts in subjectivity, from West Indians to Afro-Costarricans and from Nicaraguan refugees to nica migrants.

#### How West Indian blacks became Afro-Costarricans

As noted, blacks in Costa Rica have undergone an important identity shift, indeed a shift in subjectivity from West Indian outsiders/foreigners/others to black or Afro-Costarrican citizens, albeit largely of second-class status. In the first iteration, blacks presented a challenge to Costa Rican national identity. However, over time, and especially after the political changes emanating from the 1948 central war, blacks became central to the notion of social democracy.

The myth of Costa Rica's ethnic homogeneity and its centrality to national identity is strong and long-lived. It is also inaccurate. "At the time of independence in 1821, not even one-tenth of the population was of direct Spanish descent, while over half were mestizos, blacks, and mulattoes" (Palmer and Molina 2004: 229). Costa Rica may have been a diverse mix of people since its inception, but the introduction of a significant black population did not occur until some time after independence.<sup>4</sup> Major West Indian immigration dovetailed with the creation and expansion of banana plantations throughout Costa Rica's Atlantic coast, particularly in Limón Province and the Talamanca region. Work in the banana industry enticed a number of West Indians, especially Jamaicans, to the Costa Rica. The industry exploded in the late nineteenth century, exporting more than one million bananas by 1890, almost 3,000 times more than the 360 bunches Costa Rica exported in 1880 (Harpelle 2001: 15). Large waves of West Indians sought

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<sup>4</sup> The black slave descended population numbered almost 9000 in the colonial era, but those individuals were almost entirely integrated into the larger population. Hence, the term black refers specifically to black immigrants.

work in Costa Rica, resulting in a population of 21, 259 persons of African descent noted in the 1927 census, up from 634 in the previous census of 1892 (Harpelle 2001; Sharman 2001).

The burgeoning economy created numerous jobs, and it also had the effect of segregating West Indians to the Atlantic coast. This racial regionalization was furthered by the presence of the United Fruit Company (UFC) which performed the typical functions of an employer, and of the state, providing basic services and infrastructure. Thus, the lack of official or unofficial contact place West Indians outside the daily imagination of Costa Ricans. But, as a result of the 1927 census figures and the economic recession of the 1920s and 1930s, popular sentiment against West Indians turned nasty. Petitions to enforce an 1862 law prohibiting African and Asiatic immigration increased dramatically; as did proposals to impose quotas limiting the number of foreigners (e.g. blacks) that could work in any particular industry (Duncan and Meléndez 2005; Harpelle 2001).<sup>5</sup> The complaints reached their peak in 1934, with the result that the United Fruit Company agreed that it would not hire people of color in its new Pacific coast plants (Meléndez and Duncan 2005: 104). This restriction had the direct effect of prohibiting movement to the Pacific coast. Moreover, popular sentiment interpreted the clause as preventing the movement of West Indians anywhere outside of Limón province and its surrounds (Harpelle 2001). Hence, West Indians remained largely segregated along the eastern coast of the country, aiding in Costa Rica's image of a pure, white, homogenous population, especially in the central valley from which true whiteness was thought to emanate.

Racism and discrimination against West Indians in the first half of the twentieth century was noticeable, especially after 1920. Beyond the aforementioned prohibitions on immigration and movement, popular discourse implicated blacks as infantile, lazy, dirty and dangerous

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<sup>5</sup> The immigration law of 1862 and subsequent laws attempting to limit the number of foreign workers were never fully enforced upon the banana industry or the railroad, with the exception of the 1934 banana contract clause prohibiting black movement to the Pacific.

(Sandoval 2004a; Sharman 2001). In 1939 Picado lamented that the blood of the entire country was blackening as a result of black immigration to Costa Rica; newspaper editorials expressed similar concerns that allowing blacks to stay in Costa Rica could only contribute to its decline [Duncan and Meléndez 2005; Picado (1939) 2004]. As the UFC moved its operation from the Atlantic coast to the Pacific to avoid encroaching banana diseases, it took many of its services and infrastructure with it. As the Costa Rican government stepped in, it heeded calls to deal with the foreigners. The Cortés government (1936-40) is particularly notable for its attempts to push West Indians out of Costa Rica, via legislation meant to create hardship: in the four years of his administration registration of all foreigners was required, and citizenship pushed, even as both were made harder to achieve. Rents on farmland increased dramatically even as services dried up (Harpelle 2001).

At this point in Costa Rica's history, whiteness was predicated on peacefulness and equality, but these traits were restricted to those who fit the other mandatory component of whiteness – fair skin. Concerns about the supposed blackening population and its impact on national identity were clear. But, the timing of this backlash indicates that much of it was predicated on economic issues of the 1920s through the 1940s. Those suffering the effects of world economic recession and war looked for a set of foreigners on whom to place their blame, any population would do. That is not to say that racism and discrimination emanating from a perception of white unity did not weigh heavily, but it does explain the timing of heavy racial sentiment, and why such severe antipathy to blacks was magically superseded just a short time later.

Increasingly, and especially in the post-Civil war era, there was an emphasis on integrating blacks into the population. The language of these appeals indicates that blacks were

not irredeemably *black*. They simply needed instruction and encouragement. For instance, Carlos Alfaro Monge (1941: 126) noted that the Costa Rican negro - note the possessive - was “in magnificent physical condition, but pedantic and stupid... [they were] a transient group without national consciousness and no spiritual nationality.” This comment is a direct and unequivocal slur against people of African descent. And yet these complaints are of the type that could be “fixed.” Regardless of the discriminatory, and to some extent successful attempts of the Cortés administration (and others) to push blacks out, they were clearly undergoing a transition from West Indians to black Costa Ricans, at least in some sectors of the public imagination. Hence, an integrationist shift was required, and it began in force in the 1940s. As early as 1940 public officials began a push to change the language of education from English to Spanish and the provision of education from private and Protestant to public and Catholic (Palmer 2005).

This integrationist push culminated under Figueres after the civil war of 1948. Upon his ascent to office Figueres extended citizenship to all unrecognized West Indians, and began a social democracy campaign that would emphasize class as the only reasonable basis for distinction in society. Under his reign and that of his successors, education and a number of other state ministries expanded into the Atlantic coast, to integrate and bring into the fold the black Costa Rican. Yet contrary to popular belief this integrationist appeal was not benign. Figueres’ embrace of Afro-Costarricans was strategic for a number of reasons. In the first place, he needed their votes to gain future office.<sup>6</sup> While others worried about the “grave . . . and irregular acts” that might be committed by those who “had not ‘properly’ adopted the customs or laws of the country” (Harpelle 2001: 173), Figueres targeted the votes of the thousands of blacks who had gained the right to vote, and whose vote he would need in what promised to be a hard

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<sup>6</sup> Figueres ruled the interim junta government from 1948 until 1949 when it was dissolved to allow the winner of the 1948 election, Otilio Ulate, to take office. Figueres stood for, and won, actual election in 1953.

fought election. Indeed, it was a strategic recognition that prompted Figueres' newly formed political party the National Liberation Party (PLN) to accept the bids of two black candidates when no other party would. In this way the black community gained its first black representatives – Alex Curling and Stanley Britton – and Figueres established himself and the PLN as the party of black Costa-Ricans, a relationship that would last for decades.

Beyond short-term instrumental calculations, the social democratic experiment of the post civil war era required a major shift in the subjectivity of Costa Rica's black others. It had been politically and economically convenient to consider them as simple foreigners, and then as a black menace. But in the post 1948 era, if the social democratic experiment was to work, then blacks *had* to be integrated into the Costa Rican polity. A democratic regime cannot claim legitimacy without the successful political and economic incorporation of the lower strata of the population (Lipset 1959: 83). Costa Rica's expanding national identity continued to be predicated on whiteness, but that whiteness expanded to include democraticness, and, increasingly in the latter part of the twentieth century, peacefulness. It may indeed have been the case that social democracy functioned simply as a convenient sidestep to racism (Sharman 2001: 49). But, Costa Rica's social democratic mission could not be accomplished if there remained a black population that was actively discriminated against. This was true not because white Costa Ricans began necessarily to think about blacks differently, or to embrace them more, but because civilized (e.g. white) people did not discriminate in such barbaric ways. These were the hard fought lessons of Costa Rica's own civil war and of the World War II. Hence, acceptance, on some level, of blackness, became increasingly necessary for Costa Rican whiteness, to continue. Costa Ricans discovered that a little bit of blackness did not necessarily negate whiteness; in some cases it enhanced it.

There was yet one more reason that Afro-Costarricans had to be integrated. The 1949 Constitution, constructed on a social democratic basis, granted citizenship to blacks and officially ended all prohibitions on movement, real or imagined. Hence, at the popular level white identity could no longer be predicated on absence of blackness from the meseta central.<sup>7</sup> With the lifting of restrictions on movement and the expansion of services, particularly education, into the Atlantic, the likelihood of increased internal migration was high. In fact, it fear of this looming black immigration threat likely fostered acceptance of social democratic policies. Hence Costa Rican elites had to think of a way to sustain the myth of whiteness even in the face of a more obvious, and localized, black presence. Public discourse which continued, and continues, to sustain a myth of racial homogeneity is certainly one popular way to do this. Tourist brochures and media portrayals continue to paint Costa Rica as a white, middle-class, and often blond-haired society, belying the obvious reality on the ground (Molina 2003; Sandoval 2004b). And yet, at some level, once it was clear that expelling blacks or relegating them to a reserve, as had been done with the remaining indigenous populations, were not viable options. The country had to think of some way to integrate blacks into the nation-building project.

Said differently, blacks became a necessary other in the social democratic project; democratic legitimacy would rest on their inclusion. For the project to work there had to be some population(s) in need of integration and redemption; blacks and women served this purpose well. Moreover, there had to be success stories to which one could point as evidence that a black person can be successful. Black elected officials such as Britton and Curling, among others, fulfilled this role. Success cases such as these allow elites to ignore criticisms that Limón

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<sup>7</sup> There was never a true absence of blackness in the central valley. Indeed the realization that some 400+ blacks were already living in San Jose as of the 1927 census likely prompted some of the backlash which characterizes that period (Harpelle 2001).

remains one of the poorest and regions in the country, and that a large percentage of its inhabitants fall below the poverty line (Harpelle 2001). The beauty of the social democratic experiment is that it does not require that every individual be successful, simply that everyone has the possibility. That blacks *could* achieve, if they put their minds to it, is enough. The fact that many do not is thought to speak to an individual problem, not a structural political issue. Moreover, the expansion of notions of whiteness allows for successful blacks to be defined as white (Biesanz et al., 1999; Wade 1997).

It was especially helpful that many Afro-Costarricans shared a similar sentiment. Purcell (1993) makes a cogent argument that a strong notion of solidarity was and is central among Afro-Costarricans. This solidarity is not race-based, however defined. Instead it is based on proper behavior, comportment, and attitudes. Educated – read cultured – people are welcome in, and central to the community, whereas illiterate – read badly behaved – and other similarly designated people are designated as outsiders in the community. In opposition to whiteness, blackness is drawn not on skin color, but on a commitment to black *communitas* (Sharman 2001: 58). It was in this sense that Afro-Costarricans could be successfully brought in to an expanded national identity project that met the needs and ideas of both parties. The expansion of whiteness was not simply a top down project, but one with which black social mores dovetailed quite nicely.

From Nicaraguans to nicas; refugees to migrants

If blacks were eventually interpellated as central to the nation-building project, nicas have been thought to function entirely outside of it.

The history of Nicaraguan settlement in Costa Rica is a long one, beginning with Costa Rica's annexation of Guanacaste-Nicoya in 1824. Nicaraguans continued a relationship with Costa Rica, with a number of individuals immigrating for coffee jobs throughout the nineteenth century. The next major flow of Nicaraguan settlement began in force in the 1920s, as a number migrated to the Atlantic coast seeking work in the banana industry. The 1927 Census indicated that some 20,000 Nicaraguans were living in and around Puerto Limón, although some estimates placed the number closer to 30,000 (Sandoval 2004b: 95). Limón was in an odd position in the 1920s. Anti-black sentiment was increasing, and would reach new heights by the end of the decade; but the Atlantic coast was not yet so settled that most vallecentralinos felt previous concerns of hot and inhospitable climates to be overcome. Hence, Nicaraguan and other Hispanic immigrants arriving in the 1920s found ready work in the banana industry.

Interestingly, Nicaraguans were welcomed by the UFC in two forms that were to foreshadow future Nicaraguan relations with Costa Rica/Ricans. Nicaraguans were originally welcomed as cheaper labor than West Indians. Because they were less educated and did not speak the communal language of Limon – English – Nicaraguans commanded much lower salaries than their West Indian counterparts. They also functioned as strikebreakers, resulting in an antagonistic relationship with the West Indians whom they replaced and undermined.<sup>8</sup> It was as a result of their work in the banana industry that Nicaraguans would first gain a national association with communism, as they were the primary group to which the Communist Party appealed in the major banana strike of 1934 (Sandoval 2004b).

Nonetheless, in the early part of the twentieth century, Nicaraguans were of no major relevance in the nation-building project. If anything, local and external Nicaraguans served the

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<sup>8</sup> The UFC encouraged these divisions and actively fostered them. Nicaraguan and West Indian living quarters and work teams were entirely segregated by race, so as to minimize opportunities for interaction (Harpelle 2001).



role of enhancing the notion of Costa Rica as ethnically homogenous, cultured, and peaceful, in contraposition to their mestiza and violent neighbors to the north (Molina 2002). This general notion seems to have persisted well into the latter part of the twentieth century, through the point of the Nicaraguan civil war. Costa Ricans seemed willing to differentiate individual Nicaraguans from the actions of their government, welcoming those who opposed the war as refugees.

There were some instrumental reasons for this welcoming policy. In an effort to make Costa Rica a “showcase for democracy” USAID contributed some 592 million dollars in economic aid to Costa Rica between 1983 and 1985; it contributed just over 1 billion dollars over the 1980s period in return for visible signs of Costa Rica’s contra support (Edelman 1999: 77-78). Yet, strategic concerns alone do not explain Costa Rican attitudes towards Nicaraguans. Estimates place the number of official refugees between 1983 and 1989 at roughly 30,000 (Basok 1990: 284). Estimates of the total number of Nicaraguan refugees, including the undocumented, range from 100, 00 to 250,000 (Basok 1990: 285, Biesanz et. al 1999: 117). If these estimates are to be believed, the Nicaraguan population “explosion” had already begun, but backlash against Nicaraguans did not peak until the 1990s. The lag in anti-Nicaraguan sentiment is likely explained by the same processes that framed anti-West Indian sentiment early in the century. The framing of Nicaraguan immigrants as refugees positioned them as temporary visitors likely to return home at war’s end. Hence, although the vast majority of Nicaraguans in Costa Rica did not contribute to Costa Rica’s economic fortunes (because of their unofficial status, they could not be used to show support of US aims in the region); their temporary status shielded them somewhat.

Attitudes changed sharply after the end of the war. As the Nicaraguan population shifted from refugees fleeing the war to migrants fleeing the increasing economic poverty and chaos of

their home country, public opinion began to shift dramatically. The number of officially documented Nicaraguans increased to 226,000, or 6 percent of the population by the time of the 2000 census (Vargas 2005). Backlash increased dramatically in the face of this population explosion. Visiting neighbors from the north shifted in the public imagination, beginning a transition in subjectivity from Nicaraguans to nicas. Nicas faced discriminatory attitudes quite similar to those which West Indians faced some fifty years earlier. Yet the nica population differed in two significant ways; by their closeness and by what they represented.

Unlike their West Indian predecessors, who migrated to a sparsely populated part of the country, whose migration was originally thought to be temporary, and who only migrated to the central valley much later and in much lesser numbers, nicas came directly to the heart of whiteness. Costa Rica's central valley has been synonymous with whiteness in both its literal – racial – form, and its expanded form. “Geography [has been] the basis for sharp distinction, ever since colonial days, between the more-developed center and the less developed periphery . . . those living farthest from the country's center have always been among the poorest Ticos with the least political clout or access to government services” (Biesanz et. al. 1999: 126). The meseta central is imagined as the most cosmopolitan, urban (e), educated, and cultured part of the country. Moreover, as the seat of national government - hence the seat of social democracy – and the center (literal and metaphorical) of the country, it was imminently peaceful. Those violent events that did occur within the country remained largely outside of the central valley. The central valley, especially San José and its immediate surrounds, is the “epicenter of the public sphere” (Molina 2003: 3). In the popular imagination, nicas represent none of these things. Hence the nica population has been seen as an invasion, not just by dint of their large migrant numbers, but via their imposition on and disruption of the white center.

As is frequently (and increasingly) noted, nicas overlap with and signal economic and political decline in Costa Rica. At its height the social democratic project boasted some impressive successes: college enrollment figures were higher than many European countries; literacy rates passed 90 percent; major development and infrastructure projects were undertaken throughout the 1960s and 1970s; the percent of middle-class ticos increased from 12 percent in 1950 to 28 percent by the late 1970s; and public social expenditures reached new heights in the early 1980s (Mitchell and Pentzer 2008; Seligson and Muller 1987; Vargas Cullel, et al., 2006). This growth had very positive political impacts: in the 1978-79 period 84 percent of Costa Ricans expressed strong system support and a notable 88.2 percent indicated trust in and respect for the country's democratic political institutions (Seligson and Muller 1987: 312).

Yet numerous data indicate that the country was nearing the end of the expanding welfare state model in the early 1980s. The state's interventionist growth model was quite impressive in its impacts, but it was financed with significant and increasing debt. Costa Rica's debt shot from 840 million dollars in 1978 to more than 3 billion by 1982; in the same time inflation soared from single digits to almost 100 percent, and unemployment doubled (Edelman 1999: 3; Seligson and Muller 1987: 315). The Gross National Product declined from a positive 6.1 percent in the 1966-1967 period to negative 11.5 percent by 1982 (Céspedes et al., 1984: 56). In 1981 Costa Rica declared that it would stop servicing its foreign debt, preceding similar announcements from Mexico. Debt driven growth was not limited to the state. Consumer expansion increased dramatically in the 1980s with the introduction of credit cards and installment plans (Molina 2003).

The negative effects have been immediate. Social investment declined 9 percent over a twelve year period, from 23 percent in 1980 to 14 percent in 1992 (PNUD 1997: 118). The

internal composition of investment changed as well, with 13 percent reduction in health and nutrition expenditures, and an 11 percent increase in direct welfare payments to qualifying individuals (Sandoval 2004b: 165). In short, Costa Rica was undergoing a severe political and economic crisis. But more important than declines in real wealth, have been the blows to Costa Rican national identity. Oettler (2007: 7) affirms “The ‘transition to neoliberalism’ of the late 1980s implied the replacement of the social democratic model by structural adjustment and cut-backs in social security, education, and health.” In essence “Costa Rica. . . has become more and more ‘Central Americanized’” (Seligson 2002: 162).

Costa Ricans have become increasingly uncertain of the social democratic model and this is manifested in consistent declines in public trust, high electoral abstention rates, and continuing economic belt tightening (Vargas-Cullel et al., 2006; Lehoucq 2005). It has also manifested itself in severe backlash against nica immigrants. Despite all of the difficulties that Afro-Costarricans have faced, the country has shown itself to be particularly adept at homogenizing others into the national space, if only via processes of marginalization and invisibilization. But nicas represent “the most extraordinary challenge to the homogenizing powers of Costa Rica” not because of the mestizo mixture that they represent, nor because they are qualitatively more ‘other’ than blacks or the indigenous (Palmer and Molina 2004: 230). They are a challenge because of the physical space they occupy (the outskirts of San José and the central valley) and the economic and political decline that they represent. Costa Rica can no longer afford to welcome the visitors, because they are increasingly (if inaccurately) seen to be taking away money and resources from a country that can no longer afford it. One of the key components of whiteness in Costa Rica – its opposition to the darkness and poverty of the rest of Central America – is fraying. In this manner, the nica experience overlaps quite a bit with the West

Indian experience. They function not only in contraposition to white identity, but as scapegoats made to take responsibility for much larger internal processes.

Some of the opposition to the nica population appears to be racially motivated, or to take on a racialized tone. Comments that frame them as pests and contaminants are quite frequent (Sandoval 2004b; Palmer and Molina 2004). Indeed, Sandoval (2004b: 28) notes that the four most prolific media frames associated with nicas are disease, immigration, border conflicts, and criminality. Yet, a great degree of the negative sentiment and discrimination appears to be predicated on the notion of what nicas take away. One primary complaint appears to be that nicas take jobs and resources away from deserving Costa Ricans. The other is that nicas bring violence along with them. Notions that the nicas cause most of the violence in Costa Rica have been continually disproven; and yet the association continues (Biesanz et al., 1999; Sandoval 2004a). Interestingly, the scapegoating process is not limited to nicas. In fact, Costa Ricans appear to blame many of their troubles on convenient foreigners. Oettler (2007: 18) comments “It is noteworthy that the image of criminal Nicaraguans coexists with the perception of a much more threatening ‘invasion’: Many interviewees refer to transnational organized crime, with drug trade and *sicarios* (Colombian killers) undermining the social fabric.”

Herein lies the difficulty, the presence of nicas is imminently more problematic. Blacks could be reinterpreted as central to the social democratic project, and hence central to white identity. But nicas, by dint of what they supposedly represent – violence, criminality, prostitution, disease and contamination – and what they actually represent – major economic and political and social changes in Costa Rican society – darken everyone.

## Towards a Conclusion

In this exploratory study I have attempted to trace the evolution of notions race and whiteness in Costa Rica and their relationship to national identity. Specifically I sought to map the process of non-“white” integration into the Costa Rican national project. I find that both black and nica minority groups have been central to the national identity, albeit in distinct ways. Black Costa Ricans were vital to the success of the social democratic project, hence notions of whiteness expanded to incorporate them into the national polity. Nicas have been instrumental in turning whiteness on its head, constricting notions of whiteness to a smaller and smaller qualified group (e.g. the upper class). The ramifications of this disrupture remain to be seen. Significant evidence indicates that nicas are not nearly as draining nor as problematic as popular sentiment indicates. Yet it is clear that Costa Rica is undergoing a crisis of confidence that is predicated in large part on concerns of its declining exceptionalism.

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