

Toward a Geography of Solidarity: Afro-Nicaraguan Women's Land Activism and Autonomy in the South Caribbean Coast Autonomous Region

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This article explores efforts by Afro-Nicaraguan women activists to enact their communal land rights in Bluefields during a 2009 land occupation. Creole women's interpretation of state power, underdevelopment, and the failure of the autonomy process suggest that a critical race understanding of regional politics not only reveals the persistence of structural anti-black racism but also demonstrates how the state's disregard for the region as the nation's imagined site of racial Otherness harms all *Costeños*, including poor Mestizos. Creole women's articulation of a geography of solidarity rooted in racial justice rather than blame offers new strategies for confronting regional inequality and state neglect in the construction of regional autonomy.

Keywords: Afro-descendant, Caribbean coast, land, multiculturalism, Nicaragua, women.

Occupy Bluefields?

Since the passage of the 1987 autonomy law, Afro-descendant and indigenous communities in both the Región Autónoma de la Costa Caribe Norte (RACCN, North Caribbean Coast Autonomous Region) and the Región Autónoma de la Costa Caribe Sur (RACCS, South Caribbean Coast Autonomous Region) have insisted that state recognition of their historic claims for land rights lies at the heart of regional autonomy. While several indigenous communities in the RACCN and the RACCS have received communal land titles in the last ten years, Creole communal land claims in the RACCS have faced considerable difficulties. This is particularly true in the Bluefields Creole territorial claim, which remains one of the few territories in the region that has yet to receive a communal land title. In addition to being the largest urban land claim in the region, this claim is further complicated by Bluefields' history as a multi-racial city where Afro-descendant

Creoles, Mestizos, and Indigenous Peoples have lived and owned property for more than 200 years (Gordon, 1998). 'Without land', one Creole activist argued during a general assembly of communal governments from throughout the region held in Bluefields, the administrative seat of the RACCS, 'autonomy means nothing' (Morris, 2010). This statement reveals the widespread frustration among many Creoles that regional autonomy has not produced a more just social order.

That frustration erupted in November 2009 when a group of Creoles occupied 865 acres (350 hectares) on the city's outskirts. Chanting 'back to the land!' approximately 1000 people marched into the wooded area and began to clear out small plots (León, 2009). Within days, word began to spread that the protestors were clearing out the area for local Creoles to build houses and farms. Almost immediately, several Mestizo individuals, the Universidad de las Regiones Autónomas de la Costa Caribe Nicaragüense (URACCAN, University of the Autonomous Regions of the Nicaraguan Caribbean Coast), and the Nicaraguan Navy each claimed ownership of the property and the police soon arrived to enforce these claims. The state's privileging of unverified Mestizo land claims and dismissal of Creoles' historical land claims suggested to many of the protestors that, despite widespread claims that regional autonomy is a system of multicultural, democratic governance that recognises the unique cultural rights and historical political demands of Afro-descendant and Indigenous Peoples, in practice, these communities remain disenfranchised and increasingly dispossessed political actors as the rate of Mestizo settlement on their communal lands continues unabated.

As the land occupation demonstrates, Creole activists have continued to demand that the state fulfil the promises enshrined in the Autonomy Law (Law 28) and the Law of Communal Property Regime of the Indigenous Peoples and Ethnic Communities of the Autonomous Regions of the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua and of the Rivers Bocay, Coco, Indio, and Maíz (Law 445), which provides the juridical framework for the demarcation, titling, and governance of communal lands. Creole women have played a critical role in leading the struggle for communal land titling in the RACCS. Taking the land occupation as an ethnographic point of departure, this article examines how Creole women are leading efforts to advance the Bluefields territorial claim and reframing the discourse on regional autonomy and communal land rights. Specifically, it outlines Creole women land activists' efforts to develop an ethos of critical solidarity that resists the contemporary discourse of Mestizo victimhood, which treats Afro-descendant and indigenous communal land rights, regional autonomy, and multicultural citizenship reforms as exclusionary and discriminatory against Mestizos. The article asks how Creole women's place-based critiques of the national and regional governments' failure to recognise their communal land claims, the ongoing economic exploitation of the region, and persistent structural racism offer clues for creating more 'liveable human geographies' in which the needs of all Costeños might be met (McKittrick, 2006).

Placing Bluefields: Race, Rights and Territories in the RACCS

In the Nicaraguan racial imagination, the Caribbean Coast, particularly Bluefields, is another country. In contrast to the predominantly Mestizo, monolingual, Hispanophone Pacific, the Coast is home to a polyglot population of indigenous, Creole, Garifuna, and Mestizo communities. The divergent colonial past and racial formations of the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua produced a strong regional *costeño/a* identity, which is profoundly racialised and defined in tension with the Mestizo nation-state (Ruiz y Ruiz,

1925). As many scholars have noted, state domination has historically been enacted through the social organisation of space in Nicaragua, producing a politicised regionalism on the Coast which has been a central feature of Creole politics since the dismantling of the Mosquito Reserve in the late nineteenth century. These regional politics have historically been premised on defending the Coast from state exploitation, political dispossession, and economic exclusion. The multi-racial regional identities emerging from this political geography have been an ongoing source of concern for the Nicaraguan state, whose official policy towards the region has focused primarily on integrating the Coast into the Mestizo nation.

As a result, state elites across the political spectrum have tended to view Creole and indigenous political demands for autonomy and territory as impediments to national development and modernisation. The violent counter-revolutionary war during the 1980s forced the Nicaraguan state, then under the administration of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), to accede to Miskitu and Creole demands for regional autonomy and territory. Since the establishment of the autonomous regions in 1987, struggles to defend the place of the Coast in the national political order have focused primarily on the demarcation and titling of communal lands. Creole women have played an active role in these efforts, working in grassroots community organisations such as the Black Farmers Back to the Land Movement, small agricultural collectives, and serving in the communal government structures that emerged following the approval of Law 445. But women involved in these struggles have faced opposition not only from the state, but also from local Creole elites and a variety of Mestizo political actors, as well as men within their own communities reluctant to follow women's leadership (Goett, 2006; Woods and Morris, 2007).

Creole women's leadership in the struggle for communal land claims in Nicaragua reflects similar processes unfolding throughout Latin America. Over the last 30 years, Afro-descendant movements for racial justice have increasingly focused on land as a critical site for addressing historical patterns of racial discrimination, redressing contemporary structural inequalities, and ensuring the survival of their communities in the face of neoliberal economic reforms that leave them increasingly vulnerable and impoverished. The growing literature on black land rights struggles in Honduras, Brazil, Colombia, and Nicaragua reveals the critical roles that women have played in these political spaces. Their participation demonstrates how black women not only engage in the politics of place to defend their communities from broader processes of anti-black racism and economic inequality but also how they transform local gendered relations of power through their involvement in locally-based political struggles (Goett, 2006; Asher, 2009; Brondo, 2013; Perry, 2013).

While Nicaragua was the first Latin American country to approve multicultural citizenship reforms that recognised the cultural rights of Afro-descendant and Indigenous Peoples, several countries have adopted similar constitutional reforms. These significant reforms have not altered ongoing patterns of anti-Black racism in Nicaragua. Mirna Cunningham Kain (2006) argues that the 'central problem continues to be the form and behavior of the National State: mono-ethnic, exclusionary in its concept of citizenship and in the distribution of goods and services' (Cunningham Kain, 2006: 5). While the juridical discourse around regional autonomy and communal land rights has been rearticulated under the official narrative of multiculturalism, these reforms have been undermined by persistent state corruption, a lack of political will to meaningfully support the autonomy process, and the effects of neoliberal economic reforms since the early 1990s.

On the Caribbean Coast, neoliberal reforms have intensified the extractive model of economic development of the region's past enclave economy as demonstrated in the state's continued exploitation of the region's natural resources, many of which are located on (or under) Afro-descendant and indigenous communal lands. This includes central and regional governments granting concessions to multinational corporations for logging, mining, fishing, and petroleum and natural gas exploration rights. These concessions, which are routinely made without consulting the communities directly impacted by these agreements, contradict both the Autonomy Statute and Law 445, which established coastal people's right to participate in decision-making processes directly related to the exploitation of the region's natural resources. The state's plans for mega-projects such as the Tumarín hydroelectric dam as well as the Ortega administration's recent approval of an interoceanic canal which will cut through the Rama-Kriole Territory south of the Bluefields territorial claim further demonstrate how, even when the state discursively recognises the land rights of minority communities, in practice those rights are not inalienable but are contingent on the larger needs of the national government. In 2013, Creole, Miskitu, and Rama leaders filed suit against the national government for approving the canal project without consulting Afro-descendant and indigenous communities in the region (Hoy Diario, 2013). As one activist argued, the state cannot be trusted even when it provides titles for communal lands because, 'They give you the title with one hand, and with the other hand they taking away all what you need to live' (interview: Woods, 2009). When local support for the state's development programmes and actions cannot be obtained legally, national and regional government officials routinely engage in coercion and bribery to achieve the desired end.

Afro-descendant and indigenous communities have also seen their land claims threatened by the advance of the agricultural frontier, as dispossessed Mestizo farmers as well as wealthy Mestizo ranchers and large landholders mostly from the Pacific and Central departments settle on unoccupied land throughout the Autonomous Regions. This phenomenon has given rise to increased land trafficking, in which many small-scale Mestizo farmers will, after a brief period of residency and having made small improvements on lands to which they hold no title, will then sell the property either to another small farmer or to a large landholder, resulting in the concentration of large tracts of coastal lands in the hands of a small group of Mestizo landowners.

Since the 1980s, Mestizo settlement in the region has increased dramatically and Mestizos currently comprise 60.1 percent of the population (Instituto Nacional de Información de Desarrollo, 2005). It remains difficult to determine how many Mestizos hold legitimate land titles in the region and how many have gained ownership through illegal possession, since reliable statistical information on this phenomenon remains limited. Nevertheless, the available data suggests that while a significant number of recent Mestizo settlers in the region hold suppletory or legitimate individual land titles, many more have settled on coastal lands without titles (PNUD, 2005; Rivas and Broegaard, 2006). Mestizo settlement has moved from the western hinterlands of the autonomous regions to encroachment on lands that fall within the territorial land claims of Afro-descendant and indigenous communities. This land settlement has had tremendous ecological and political implications for the region, as Mestizo farmers have imported the practice of slash and burn agriculture that has resulted in massive deforestation, soil erosion, and water contamination to cultivate resource-intensive crops including cotton and coffee or to engage in cattle ranching.

Despite the growth of Mestizo settlement and their increased political power in the region, in recent years Mestizos have begun to argue that they are excluded under

the project of regional autonomy and multicultural citizenship. This discourse, which I refer to as Mestizo victimhood, specifically targets the legal measures that protect Afro-descendant and indigenous communities' communal land claims as an affront to Mestizos' citizenship rights. This discourse, which is an emergent feature of contemporary multicultural racial formations in Nicaragua, defined the public response to the 2009 land occupation.

'They Discriminate against Us as Mestizos': Mestizo Victimhood and the Geography of Blame

In January 2010, approximately 100 Mestizo *campesinos* from the Kukra River area marched through the city decriing the discriminatory nature of Law 445. They came to protest the government's titling of the Bluefields and the Rama and Kriole Territories, which they claimed contained 'hundreds of manzanas of land that allegedly belong[ed]' to 600 Mestizo *campesinos* (León, 2010). This contention was inaccurate; the Bluefields land claim to date remains untitled. Nevertheless, these farmers demanded the repeal of Law 445 and that the regional government grant Mestizo settlers legal title to their lands or they would boycott the city by withholding foodstuffs (Jarquín, 2010). One protestor explained his grievance to a local Mestiza journalist: 'We have rights, too. We respect the rights of others but we have rights and the law does not include us.' The journalist then asked if he thought that this was a form of discrimination and he said absolutely, 'We are being discriminated as Mestizos. They discriminate against us as Mestizos' (Morris, 2010).

It was later revealed that a councillor in the Regional Council of the RACCS and member of the Liberal Constitutionalist Party (PLC), orchestrated the march; nevertheless, this demonstration is useful for making sense of the vexed racial politics of land. If it was a fabricated protest, there seemed to be nothing manufactured about the event's aggrieved effect. The PNUD study found that Mestizos living in the communities of Tortuguero, La Cruz, adjacent to the municipalities of Pearl Lagoon and Desembocadura (predominantly Creole and Miskitu areas) believed that Law 445 only benefitted indigenous communities and threatened their interests as farmers and cattle ranchers. The study concluded that the lack of understanding about the actual intent and scope of the law produced 'negative and erroneous perceptions' as well as resentment among Mestizos about the law (PNUD, 2005: 64). The assertion that 'We are Nicaraguans' demonstrates that despite the rearticulation of Nicaragua as a multicultural nation, the ideal citizen continues to be read as Mestizo. The claim to normative citizenship underwrites many Mestizo settlers' sense of entitlement to what they perceive to be empty, unproductive coastal lands.

This is a view that the state has tacitly encouraged for its own reasons. Gerald Riverstone (2004: 62) argues that the ever advancing agricultural frontier '[serves] as a "political safety valve" that allows mounting social pressures from unequal development in Pacific Nicaragua to be absorbed by the sparsely inhabited Caribbean Coast region'. Since the 1960s, the Nicaraguan Government has relied on the region as a run-off site for populist agrarian reform policies and land redistribution programmes that have simultaneously facilitated a project of internal colonisation aimed at further assimilating the multiracial Coast into the Mestizo nation (Vilas, 1989; PNUD, 2005). In a survey of Mestizos living in the municipalities of El Rama, Nueva Guinea, Muelle de los Bueyes, and El Ayote – all of which fall within the Bluefields territorial land claim – 15 percent

of the survey participants claimed that they received their land titles from the government through agrarian reform programmes (PNUD, 2005). Rather than address the structural causes of land dispossession and displacement, the state increasingly relies on the Coast as a site for poor Mestizos in the Pacific who have become the excess, surplus labour of a neoliberal economy that has no use for them.

The PNUD study asked Mestizos in the Pacific about the importance of the Coast to the nation, and approximately 78 percent of respondents believed that the Coast's primary importance to the nation is its significance as a site for natural resources – water, lumber, minerals, biodiversity, oil reserves, etc. –, whose exploitation could improve the national economy. The study suggested that Mestizos tend to imagine the Coast as a “promised land”, an uninhabited territory, or as a repository of riches that belongs to the majority Nicaraguan society by manifest destiny and divine will’ (PNUD, 2005: 8). The state has done little to disrupt this discourse of the Coast as an open frontier and has reinforced it through the use of the Coast as a settlement site for displaced Mestizo farmers (Vilas, 1989; Riverstone, 2004; PNUD, 2005; Hooker, 2010).

Unlike historical state policy toward the Coast, which espoused an explicitly racist discourse of Mestizo cultural superiority, contemporary state policy is enacted under the banner of multicultural nationalism that obscures how structural racism functions in the region (Hooker, 2010; Ruiz y Ruiz, 1925). Mestizos’ ambivalent and often hostile responses to Black and indigenous mobilisation reflect the struggle to reconcile ongoing effects of institutional racism with the new reality of multicultural citizenship in Latin America. In his work on Ladino responses to Maya ascendancy in post-conflict Guatemala, Charles Hale (2006) describes the emergence of ‘racial ambivalence’ among Ladinos, whose recognition of indigenous rights and multicultural democracy is contradicted by their continued investment in the maintenance of their structurally privileged position. Hale’s pioneering work in this area suggests the need to examine how models of multicultural governance have impacted local racial and identity formations among powerful social groups in Central America.

As many scholars have noted, the recognition of multicultural difference in Nicaragua has not required Mestizos to interrogate the nation’s long history of racial and regional exclusion of the Caribbean Coast (Hooker, 2005, 2009; Hale, 2006). The adoption of a politics of recognition decoupled from a critical race analysis has allowed Mestizos to participate in multiculturalism in ways that actually reify and reproduce their structural privilege. This depoliticised multiculturalism has allowed Mestizos to deploy multicultural discourse in order to lay claim to a discourse of victimhood in which their economic interests and rights as normative citizens are threatened by the multicultural citizenship demands of Black and indigenous communities. The institutional processes by which the state has facilitated Mestizos’ access to Coast lands and natural resources reveal how Mestizo privilege as a racial project is reproduced through seemingly race-neutral and invisible mechanisms that systematically undermine Creoles’ land claims (Omi and Winant, 1994). It also demonstrates how structurally powerful groups engage in identity politics in ways that normalise their social dominance while delegitimising identity politics which challenge unequal relations of power (Lipsitz, 2006).

Recent efforts by poor Mestizos to appropriate various tools of the Autonomy Law and Law 445, including the right to identify collectively as an ethnic group with claims to coastal lands, illustrates how multicultural juridical discourse and legal infrastructure can be deployed to reconstitute Mestizo social and political dominance within multicultural governance. In the RACCS, for example, Mestizos dominate the Regional Council and are increasingly powerful actors in municipal governments throughout

the region (Gonzalez, 2011). Efforts to appropriate the communal government model, which was designed under Law 445 to ensure that Black and indigenous territories would have meaningful state representation, both obscures the actual purpose of the law while undermining its viability as a corrective strategy for historical and ongoing territorial dispossession.

This narrative of Mestizo victimhood foregrounds Mestizos as worthy, legitimate citizens whose rights to equal protection under the law are threatened by Black and indigenous claims for regional redress and the redistribution of land and resources. This narrative performs a double function: allowing the state to turn a blind eye to Black suffering while reproducing the fiction that Creoles are in a structurally privileged position. As Bonilla-Silva (2010) points out, racial privilege is not uniform; differences of class, gender, sexuality, education, and region determine the extent to which individuals benefit from group privilege. Nevertheless, it is clear that *vis-à-vis* Black and indigenous communities, Mestizos enjoy a level of structural privilege that allows them to occupy communal lands on the Caribbean Coast, assert their right to transform them into private property holdings, and to capitalise on them through land-trafficking with little fear of state reprisal.

The discourse of Mestizo victimhood functions within what Paul Farmer (1992) in his work on the HIV/AIDS crisis in Haiti refers to as the 'geography of blame' in which social redress and racial justice for the region's Afro-descendant and indigenous communities marginalises poor Mestizos. The trope of the industrious, long-suffering *campesino* reifies racialised discourses of Creoles as opportunistic, duplicitous quasi-citizens. The very real poverty in which many Mestizos live is attributed to the self-serving, pseudo-political demands of Creoles that obscure the needs and rights of the real, ideal Nicaraguan citizen, the Mestizo *campesino*. The narrative of Mestizo victimhood is a central ideological component of the geography of blame premised on a simple social equation: the fulfilment of Black and indigenous collective rights infringes upon the individual/collective rights of Mestizos to enjoy the benefits of normative citizenship (Hale, 2006; Hooker, 2009). Mapping the geography of blame, the various discursive practices and collective actions that Mestizos engage in to naturalise their structural privilege reveals how the current land conflict has developed. Creole women activists who participated in the 2009 land occupation, however, articulated a different perspective on the roots of the region's poverty and offered a vision of racial justice and regional solidarity that recognises the economic needs of Mestizos while maintaining the historical and political legitimacy of Creole land claims.

Creole Women's Counter-Geographies

Two weeks after the march, members of the Creole Communal Government (CCG) set out early one Sunday morning to visit the occupied area. Nora Newball, CCG coordinator, and Dolene Miller, CCG representative to the National Commission for Demarcation and Titling (CONADETI), went to meet with the community to discuss the results of their meetings with the municipal Property Administration and formulate the next steps in their efforts to get the state to recognise the occupation and provide legal titles to each family. Mestiza women seated with their children on the front porches of their small homes watched the group march toward the city's northern hills. Judging from the new appearance of the houses, these families were recent arrivals. According to Miller, they were among the group of approximately 185 Mestizo families who received assistance

from the municipal government in a housing programme sponsored by the Sandinista government.

For many Creoles involved in the occupation, this gesture was the proverbial last straw. Although the CCG submitted the Bluefields communal land claim in 2006 to the Intersectorial Commission for Demarcation and Titling (CIDT), the agency responsible for receiving communal land claims and approving requests to begin the demarcation and titling process, their petition was not approved until January 2010. While the Bluefields land claim languished in the CIDT, the municipal and regional governments, with the support of the central government, provided Mestizo families with land and housing – and this was not the first time. For many, the state's willingness to provide Mestizo families with land in the heart of a Creole communal land claim, while ignoring the needs of Creole families living in similar economic conditions, demonstrated the state's indifference to the Bluefields claim.

When the delegation arrived, about 45 people were gathered at the occupation site, at least half of them women. Miss Lena Brown (pseudonym), who was among the first people to enter the area, chose to participate in the occupation because the house where she and her children lived with a large extended family was too crowded: 'We is not afraid. We going to work and we going to hold on until when the government give us [a] piece. Because we no have a home and it's *three* family in one house. I have eight children and all of us need a piece.' Other women at the gathering echoed this sentiment. For them, the occupation emerged from their need for land and dignified housing.

Within the hour, approximately 100 people were gathered in the clearing. Opening the gathering with prayer and songs including 'We Shall Overcome', Newball provided an update of the CCG's meetings with the local Human Rights Attorney's Office, the Property Administration, and the Mayor's Office. Despite their efforts to get the central, municipal and regional governments to resolve the dispute by providing the occupants with land titles, the state refused to do so. Indeed, Property Administration officials dismissed the occupants as *crackqueros* (crack-cocaine dealers and addicts), infringing the property rights of the land's legitimate owners.

Community members were particularly offended by the *crackqueros* reference. As Goett (2011) notes in her analysis of multicultural governmentality and counter-narcotics policing in Nicaragua, media representations of the drug trade focus disproportionately on the Caribbean Coast as the primary site of drug traffic, while drug trafficking on the Pacific Coast is rarely addressed. By linking the land occupation to narcotics trafficking, these officials delegitimised the occupation in the eyes of the public by effacing the historical and legal basis on which the occupants based their actions. By referring to the occupation participants as *crackqueros* these state officials not only marked them as unworthy of the kinds of state support that the municipal and regional governments routinely provided Mestizos but also echoed a widely held belief that Creoles do not need such assistance. As one woman at the gathering complained, it is assumed that Creoles simply 'live off drugs money'. The representation of Bluefields as a city floating on a sea of dirty drug money has come to define the region, obscuring the reality of Black suffering and poverty.

As Miss Lena's comments demonstrate women's participation in the land occupation was driven by the dire economic conditions in which they live. Erasing women's leadership in the action obscured the occupation's moral underpinnings and Creole women's efforts to mitigate Black suffering through a maternal politics of resistance (Goett, 2006; Woods and Morris, 2007). While Creole activists have pointed to their historic rights

to communal property as the primary basis for contemporary land claims, women participating in the occupation also made use of a politicised discourse of motherhood and community care-giving that treats land as a central part of their ability to fulfil their responsibilities as mothers.

News reports of the occupation did not identify Miss Lena as a key actor in the occupation, although according to the accounts of community members and representatives of the Creole Communal Government she, her sister, several adult nieces, and their children were the first people to enter into the area and begin clearing it out. A devout Baptist, Miss Lena is an active member of the Black Farmers Back to the Land Movement and maintains a small farm near Pearl Lagoon that she works with her sons. Her husband was injured in a work-related accident some years ago and remains unemployed. Since then, Miss Lena has assumed responsibility for providing for her eight children, several of whom have families of their own. She commutes from her farm in Pearl Lagoon to Bluefields where several of her children live with her sister in a crowded, concrete house in Barrio Nueva York. When she heard that the Bluefields municipal government in collaboration with the Caribbean Coast Development Council, a state agency backed by the FSLN, was sponsoring a programme to provide people with 20 to 25 *manzanas* of land, she went to sign up but was told that the programme had ended. She later learned that the office gave the land to a number of Mestizo families. Returning home empty-handed, she decided to take matters into her own hands.

Walking the city outskirts with her sister and granddaughter, she began looking for an unoccupied piece of land. As she recounted the story, she framed her efforts through a religious narrative, stating that she had been led by the Holy Spirit to 'go look the land':

I got up one morning and when I look in my room, I glimpse just a glare and like someone was telling me 'Get up. Go look the land.' And I get up and I say to Sharon [her sister] 'Let's go look a piece a land' because where we stay is a crowd of us in the house. Because we can't get nowhere and we can't buy because we are too poor to buy. [So] we walk this whole *carretera*, through the one what coming from Managua. And when we pass the Spaniard them got pure barbwire so I said to her, 'Let's we hit the north.' And when we come in we see the big woodland. And then I say, 'Let's go out to call my son'. When he come in ... he say, 'Mama, I like here.' Ain't that's all I need hear him say? We start chopping, right away! (Interview: Brown, 2010)

Women involved in the occupation repeatedly explained their involvement in the occupation through a discourse of religious obligation and maternal responsibility, insisting that their participation was not driven by greed or a desire for personal gain but by a sense of responsibility to their children whose economic possibilities in the region are increasingly bleak. They described themselves as preserving the ancestral heritage of their community and argued that since the state could not be relied upon to meet the needs of their families and Creole people, they would do it themselves.

Shortly after she and her family began to clear out the land, a Mestizo man arrived with the police claiming to be the owner. Miss Lena then went to the CCG to inform them about the nascent occupation and to request their support:

LB: They look on we and we looking on them and well, everybody facing one another. I say, 'Ay Miss Nora and Miss Dolene, we is here because we need something.' [Miss Nora] say, 'What is oonu (you all) problem?' I say,

'Well, we need a piece of land.' I say, 'And we went in a place there.' She said, 'Who send you all in there?' I say 'No one, is just the good spirit send us there because we needed a piece of land. That's what send us there.' She say, 'Oh my God,' and she hug we up and we was so happy until we cry. She say, 'This is what I waiting on! To see some Black people come in and own something because the Spaniards them going finish it.' So I said, 'Well here we are.' She said, 'And then is woman!' So we explain to her. She said, 'Okay, when them go to you now, you tell them show you they paper. As long as them do so with a paper, we going respect it.'

So when [the Mestizo claimants] went in and say well the place belong to them ... We going back down there [to the Creole Communal Government] and they call the meeting. When them call the meeting and the man went down there he couldn't show nothing.

CM: He didn't have papers.

LB: He no have, just he mouth. But then that's how Spaniard own things.

Miss Lena criticised how the state, in the form of the local police, defended the dubious property claims of individual Mestizos and local institutions. Community members noted with some irony that rarely does the state respond when Mestizos routinely squat Black and indigenous communal lands but that when a group of organised Creoles occupied lands that are said to constitute part of their historical land claim the police came to try to force them off the land. This apparent double standard in the state's treatment of Creole and Mestizo land occupation reveals the degree to which race continues to structure state practices of control and the regulation of citizenship on the Caribbean Coast.

From the beginning of the occupation, the Bluefields CCG insisted that the occupation be read as a response to the state's ongoing policy of indifference to the political demands of Coast communities. Nora Newball and Dolene Miller both supported the occupation by acting as mediators between the municipal and regional government and the occupation participants. Both activists are Creole women from Bluefields; as CCG representatives they have had the dual challenge of representing Creole interests to the Nicaraguan state while also acting as local representatives of the state to the community in accordance with Law 445. Nevertheless, they have consistently sided with the community, endorsing the occupation and plainly expressing their view that it was a direct result of Creoles' frustration with the state's failure to demarcate and title their communal lands.

By foregrounding Black and indigenous communities' political agency, they also disrupted the geography of blame by challenging the idea that they are the privileged recipients of state largesse rather than political actors who have forced the state to make certain legal concessions. Miller pointed out that the slow response to the demand for land titling reflects the state's ambivalence towards the process:

So we are saying if the law tells us how to go about it, then why we are not working towards it? Why it seems like it is the Communal Government fighting against the state? Why it look like if we are the bad one instead of the state coming in? ... Because it's not that you are going to fight against the state, it's not that you going to fight against the Spaniard – they are majority, it doesn't make any sense to fight – but they also have to understand and respect the rights of the people. Nobody's going to move them. They have to understand if they do not have documents, they would have to

come in and sit down with the communities and see how we can recognise at least their responsibility towards taking care of what is there. (Interview: Miller and Newball, 2012)

Miller and Newball's analysis reflected their understanding of how historical patterns of uneven development and contemporary processes of neoliberal reform have created the current conflict. Creole women activists were more concerned about the structural factors that produce Mestizo migration than attacking poor Mestizos for coming to the region. They pointed out that national elites and regional politicians manipulate poor Mestizos by suggesting that if Black and indigenous communities are able to realise their political aspirations for land and meaningful self-governance, poor Mestizos will be left with nothing. They argued that the fear of losing political power prevents Mestizos from forming alliances with Creoles and Indigenous Peoples based on their shared regional identity as *Costeños*. Such an alliance offers the possibility for these communities to collectively confront the uneven development of the country and the marginalisation of the Caribbean Coast in the national economy. Law 445 guarantees the communities 25 percent of all revenue generated from natural resources within their territory, yet the state persistently fails to fulfil its mandate. As Newball stated:

NN: That's why I cannot understand why, especially the Mestizos *Costeños* don't find a way to come together and join with us. Because we can't give away our rights. They have to understand that *we* have the rights and come together with us for all of us to get benefit out of it. If I give away my rights and I say, 'Okay, cause I too little bit and you is plenty high you take it', you not go get nothing out of it. It just going to be a dead land there. But if I come with you and I say, 'Okay, you have the rights to claim the territory and because of you have the rights you claim them and I going get benefit because that's the 25 percent what the law give me.'

DM: If you invest your 25 percent in bettering your community, everybody gets benefit. It's not only for the Black people.

The Autonomy Law and Afro-descendant and indigenous communal land claims present the possibility of generating economic benefits that can improve the lives of all *Costeños* regardless of their different racial backgrounds and historical patterns of land tenancy in the region. Newball's language of Creole and Mestizo *Costeños* 'coming together' for their mutual benefit revealed an ethos of solidarity that is largely absent in official and popular discussions of regional autonomy. Such coalitions need not homogenise the differences between these communities and the socioeconomic challenges that they face but might productively reframe the narrative of autonomy.

Juliet Hooker (2009, 2010) and Cunningham Kain (2006) argue that the possibilities for regional coalitions have historically been undermined by Mestizo fears of being politically and economically dominated by Afro-descendant and indigenous communities. The state capitalises on this fear by refusing to dispel the idea that the multicultural citizenship reforms enshrined in regional autonomy is a zero-sum game. Miller criticised this strategy and the way in which a fear-based understanding of regional, racial politics undermines mutually beneficial collaboration between the region's ethnic groups:

Why it is so difficult? Because people are afraid. They believe that they are not going to get anything but then the state haven't told them, haven't even explained to them the context of this law for the Caribbean Coast. What they have done is put them against the minority. So you see, you have the state against the communal government and now you have the population,

the Spaniard, against the minority. And that's dangerous because when we look at the public programs that is from the government, the majority is addressed to the Spaniard, to the poor ones. And we ask the question, what about us? (Interview: Miller and Newball, 2012)

Miller's analysis of the extreme poverty that compels Mestizos from the Pacific to migrate to the Coast and settle on communal lands stems from an awareness that the life chances of Mestizos are determined by the same neoliberal economic processes that force Creoles to leave the country to work in low-wage, low-skill jobs that prop up the regional economy through remittances. As Miller stated, Mestizo settlement by itself is not 'a racial problem', but the state privileging the needs of Mestizo *colonos* (colonists) over those of Black and indigenous communities is.

The CCG along with local activists and community members suggested that apart from protecting the interests of Mestizo settlers, the reason why the state has dragged its feet on communal land titling is to maintain control over the region's natural resources including lumber, gold, minerals, seafood, and potentially petroleum and natural gas (Vilas, 1989; Gordon, 1998). Black and indigenous communities' demands for land pose a threat to the state's development strategies. The demarcation and autonomy laws have not impeded state elites' efforts to privatise regional resources by granting concessions to multinational corporations who extract resources and wealth from the region, leaving in their wake environmental destruction and a depressed local economy. While Creole and Mestizo *Costeños* are differentially impacted by these corrupt economic policies, it is clear that the net effect is negative. Creole women activists have repeatedly argued that this shared experience of economic inequality could become the basis for forging coalitions for economic justice while also demanding more meaningful state strategies for enacting racial justice in regional politics.

Conclusion

As economic and social conditions on the Coast deteriorate, land has become even more critical in the struggle for material survival. This article demonstrates how Creole women resist official and quotidian efforts to invalidate Creole communal land claims in Bluefields by challenging the narrative of Mestizo victimhood and discourses of Black cultural pathology that dehistoricise their struggles for land rights and full citizenship. The 2009 land occupation in Bluefields and the subsequent community mobilisation marked a key moment in which Creole women activists articulated their critiques of the state and the unfulfilled promises of multicultural reform. Creole women involved in the land occupation and the CCG articulated a political strategy of solidarity that emerged out of a pragmatic assessment of the material and political realities of life on the Coast in an era of multicultural neoliberalism. As Hooker observes, however, the 'development of genuine solidarity is particularly challenging in diverse democracies' where various groups struggle to advance their collective interests in an economic landscape characterised by scarcity (Hooker, 2009: 4). This remains the central challenge of regional autonomy and the model of multicultural governance upon which it is premised. It remains to be seen if this will become a real possibility but Creole women's responses to the Bluefields land conflict leaves the door open for new solidarities to emerge that could transform the region's political landscape.

Creole women's analysis of the racial dimensions of contemporary land politics offers an 'unexpected opening' for rethinking hegemonic state and popular remedies for the region's volatile land conflict (Haraway, 1988: 590). They reject the geography of blame as an 'irresponsible knowledge claim' that reproduces an ahistorical representation of Creole political aspirations and obfuscates the structural processes that privilege Mestizo political demands in the region. Creole women activists criticised Mestizos' irresponsible knowledge claims by presenting an alternative understanding of the roots of contemporary land conflict that identified the state's (in)action as the primary cause of this political state of affairs. As the work of community activists like Miss Lena and the CCG representatives demonstrates, Creole women's analysis of the state's role in the contemporary land struggle is rooted in their identities as mothers, activists, and workers whose racial, gender, and class position places them outside of regional and national institutions. Their community activism focused on transforming these structures and creating spaces for racial and regional justice that are inclusive enough to address their specific needs as Black women as well as those that affect the region in general. Moreover they refuse to participate in a competitive geography of blame that pits Blacks and Mestizos against one another in the struggle for land and resources. Instead these women argue that the state has the capacity to redress the historical demands of Afro-descendant communities and address the economic concerns of poor Mestizos.

Tracing how the state undermines communal land claims, manipulates competing political interests on the local level, and acts in its own self-interest to maximise its control over the region's natural resources, Creole women pushed back against the discourse of Mestizo victimhood that lays the blame for regional conflict and underdevelopment on Black political aspirations for self-determination and demonstrated how the state produces economic inequality and instability through its own contradictory actions and policies. Their pragmatic critiques of the government-led 'rat race', in which the state privileges power, profits, and personal gain over the needs of its most vulnerable citizens, represent a reconfiguration of the geography of blame. Rather than simply blaming Mestizo settlers, Creole women focus their analysis on the institutions and structural processes that undermine Black land claims. These alternative visions of social justice destabilise the racialised geography of blame and the narrative of Mestizo victimhood and offer 'a third way' – the formation of a geography of solidarity – in the struggle for land and resources on the Coast.

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