Practically Invisible

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September 2001. Following an archaeological excavation in Agua Blanca, I was staying for a couple of months in the coastal village of Salango, a fishing community about six miles due southwest of the excavation site. During each week, a handful of Agua Blancans, an Ecuadorian archaeologist, and I worked in the lab, processing and cataloguing the material remains recovered during the excavation in a laboratory built by coastal archaeologist Presley Norton in the 1970s. On the weekends, however, I was working with a local youth group interested in collecting folktales, opening a local archive, and promoting cultural preservation more generally. Each Saturday and Sunday morning, they would stop by the museum to pick me up, and we would go in pairs to local houses, interviewing older community members about life in the past, older festivals and celebrations, and folktales. I enjoyed comparing the stories in Salango to those in Agua Blanca; some were similar, while others were new to me, given the difference in settings and subsistence patterns between this fishing village and the inland agricultural community of Agua Blanca.

I was not yet aware of the reasons for their sudden concern with cultural preservation. Swiss-Ecuadorian cement magnate Patrick Bredthauer, whose company, La Cemento Nacional (now Holcim Ecuador SA), had purchased Salango’s museum and the adjacent laboratory where I was working, had also secretly been buying up Salango’s lands, including oceanfront properties and access to them. I would later learn that fishermen throughout town were being devastated by the new developments, which rendered them unable to access the ocean from their homes. Even later, I would read of the battles being fought in court over the legality of the purchase of what were supposed to be communally held lands.¹

During my stay, however, I was still unaware of these proceedings. In late September, the youth group asked me to help with one more project, an upcoming cultural festival.² They had invited folkloric dance groups from all over the country to participate, and would be hosting a series of events including the launching of balsa rafts to the nearby Isla Salango and back, an event they somewhat self-consciously referred to as a regatta; various cultural performances; a food fair; and the election of a Señorita Manteña, an indigenous princess. Each visiting community, plus some local organizations and their peers from Puerto López, would be sponsoring a candidate
who would present a short speech and some kind of performance. As we walked through town, one of the young women asked me to serve as a judge for the event. Protesting that I was not the most apt judge for a beauty contest, I tried to decline, but she replied that I would be helping them out, that they could not themselves judge due to bias, and that they needed me, as I would also be the only woman on the panel. After some discussion, I accepted.

On the morning of the festival, I took my place on the sunny beachfront to watch the performances. As we waited, I glanced at the rest of the group of arbiters: a young, long-haired Italian whom I had seen biking around Puerto López on a few occasions; another US citizen living in Puerto López; and a European who worked in a local NGO, of whose specific origin I was not certain, but guessed German or Swiss from his accent. The performances began. I was most impressed by the candidate from Esmeraldas, who was modest but well-spoken, and who danced beautifully. Expressing this, however, I was quickly silenced by my fellow panelists, who gestured to the local master of ceremonies (MC). When he arrived, the Italian told him to explain the rules to me. His sotto voce reply was that I was using the wrong criteria. A candidate had to “look manteña”—look like a representative of a local indigenous community—to be the local princess. I wanted to know: What did manteños look like? That was easy, he replied: while I should look also at the dress and adornments of each candidate, and think about my archaeological experience in judging which were most authentic, in the end I really just had to pay attention to one factor, the presence or absence of una buena nariz manteña, a good Manteño nose.

From the moment I was asked to serve on the panel, I had been uncomfortable at the thought of evaluating others on subjective qualities, particularly as an outsider with comparatively little local knowledge. After this statement, however, I was dumbfounded. We four were the arbiters of authenticity—an authenticity based on an essentialized indigeneity presumed to be located in facial features and thus inalienable (see Omi and Winant 1994; Mudimbe 1988; Wade 1997). Furthermore, of all the participants, audience members, and witnesses present at the event, we were, not inconsequentially, the whitest. That authenticity and indigeneity were to be not only evaluated but also validated through whiteness and foreignness seemed, to me, at the time, both ironic and tragic.

As it turned out, we were chosen as panelists neither as connoisseurs of beauty nor as representatives of whiteness, but rather because, as outsiders, we could be depicted as impartial judges of authenticity. The idea, of course, was that a local candidate—who, after all, would necessarily be the one with the most manteña of noses, given that manteños had not historically inhabited the other regions of Ecuador—would win. Again, at the time I was not yet aware of just how much was at stake. Were Salango to lose the battle with Bredthauer, they stood to forsake not only land, but also access to livelihoods, and potentially their precarious status as a comuna, a group authorized to hold lands in commons. As foreigners—people with a different understanding of ownership, with no deep stakes in the matter, and whose presumed expertise was based both on their perceived knowledge of the local past and on their appreciation of
local aesthetics—we were ideal judges, since, if we awarded the title to the local candidate, we would essentially be providing independent, unbiased corroboration that a local manteño community did, in fact, exist.

**Negative Freedoms: The Politics of Shifting Social Identities in Coastal Ecuador**

Understanding the underlying tensions of the Salango beauty pageant requires an overview of the broader context of identity politics not only within the nation as a whole, but also within coastal Ecuador more specifically. Like many of their counterparts the world over, coastal Ecuadorian indigenous groups have had to fight to be recognized by an Ecuadorian state that for decades has denied their existence. In other words, in the racialized geography of Ecuador put forth by that state—in the ideas of who lives and belongs where in the Ecuadorian territory—the central coast has always been portrayed as the home of mestizo fishermen and farmers, images familiar and accepted within the national imaginary. Indigenous people are imagined to live—and, by extension, to belong—in the rural highlands or eastern lowlands.

This chapter examines elite Ecuadorian narratives of race and place, and explores how the coast of Ecuador is represented within those narratives in ways that result in the negative invisibility of coastal groups. As noted in the introduction, most “old-money” Ecuadorian elite reside in the highlands, with the majority in Quito, which is also home to many of the organizations, government ministries, and other groups whose discourses I analyze here. Quiteños frequently represent the coast as a space of blackness inhabited by *monos* (monkeys, a highly offensive term used to describe those perceived as being uncultured and as having darker skin). In dominant narratives, Esmeraldas, the province to the north of Manabí and home to the descendants of several communities of escaped slaves, is conflated with other areas of coastal Ecuador and with Colombia, also considered an uncultured, wild space of blackness. Furthermore, while dominant indigenous activist coalitions such as CONAIE have gained visibility, they are perceptually located primarily in the highlands and secondarily in the Amazon basin. Even within CONAIE’s own schematic representations of the country, the central coast appears not to have any indigenous communities (cf. CONAIE 1989, 284). These broader narratives frame the ways coastal groups are (or more frequently are not) perceived.

As noted in the introduction, the community central to this ethnography, Agua Blanca, is located within a national park, meaning that its control of land and resources is even less stable than it might otherwise be. Salango is another of the indigenous communities descending from the pre-Columbian communities within the Kingdom of Salangome. While its lands lie just outside Park boundaries, Salango faces similar threats to its sovereignty. With little control over material possessions, legal rights, or governmental representation, coastal groups of necessity often focus on guiding or manipulating external perceptions of themselves, perceptions held by ordinary citizens as well as government officials, by tourists as well as NGO
representatives. The very lack of control over other aspects of their existence, however, means that groups often must work within existing parameters of categorizations or labels, rather than being able to self-represent freely.

For groups to be able to “strategically deploy discourses of cultural essentialism and authenticity,” as Maximiliano Viatori argues (2007, 105), those discourses must be broadly recognized, if not in their minutiae, then at least in their general form. In the past several decades, indigenous communities on the Ecuadorian coast have represented their identity in a number of ways. At the turn of the last century, most coastal indigenous communities had been commandeered as the labor force within foreign-owned haciendas. In 1937, the Ecuadorian government passed the original Ley de Comunas, the first step toward agrarian reform. Communities in Manabí such as Agua Blanca began calling themselves comunidades campesinas (peasant communities) because the law was written to provide for self-governance within those communities that self-identified as peasant. This identity was reinforced in the 1970s, a period marked both by a second series of agrarian reform laws and, in Agua Blanca, by a decade of research by archaeologist Colin McEwan, who encouraged the community to take control of their lands by all means possible. Agua Blanca joined the Provincial Union of Peasant Organizations of Manabí (UPOCAM) and marched for its rights as a peasant community in the provincial capital of Portoviejo, as shown in the photographs (figs. 2.1, 2.2, 2.3).

Figure 2.1. Agua Blancans marching in Portoviejo, the provincial capital of Manabí, as part of the Union of Southern Manabí Communities (UCOM), an organization of peasant communes, later known as UPOCAM. (Photo courtesy of Archives of the Museum of Agua Blanca. Photographer unknown; ca. mid-1970s)
Figure 2.2. Agua Blancans in an agrarian reform rally, ca. mid-1970s. Agrarian reform, officially legislated in 1964 and commenced in the highlands, was not enacted on the coast until the mid-1970s. It was legislatively terminated in the late 1970s. (Photo courtesy of Archives of the Museum of Agua Blanca. Photographer unknown)

Figure 2.3. Agua Blancans in a pro-Roldos peasant march, May 1980. (Photo courtesy of Archives of the Museum of Agua Blanca. Photographer unknown)
Meanwhile, the Ecuadorian government continued to represent its coastal provinces as populated by mestizos, with the exception of Esmeraldas and its Afro-Ecuadorian communities. Thus in Manabí, peasant and mestizo began to be conflated with one another. To this day, although mestizos live throughout Ecuador, it is only in Manabí and Guayas provinces on the coast that they are automatically assumed to be poor, barely literate agriculturalists or fishermen—an assumption fed by sources as diverse as state tourism propaganda, elementary education texts, and official government ministries, as I will demonstrate. In fact, a word has been coined to describe coastal agriculturalists—*montubios*—a term used everywhere from Ministry of Tourism posters depicting machete-wielding individuals in Panama hats, bandanas, and work clothes, to Ministry of Agriculture television ads featuring the backward *montubio* farmer Don Esculapio and his unfathomable ignorance of cattle illnesses and respective vaccines. While at various moments coastal groups such as Agua Blanca may choose to describe themselves as *montubios*, since the term reflects a cultural identity distinct from that of *mestizos*, within the nation more generally the word is often used pejoratively, with an approximate translation that combines the ideas of “unruly coastal peasant” and “hick” (Whitten 2003b, 65).

Another category of identity used by coastal groups refers to the indigenous past. Throughout Manabí and Guayas provinces, communities are beginning to identify as Manteño/Huancavilca; in Agua Blanca, the decision to self-represent as manteño in particular circumstances and settings has been a conscious political choice. While government and indigenous organizations are beginning to recognize these coastal groups as indigenous, many government websites still describe the Manteño-Huancavilca civilization as having disappeared in 1532 with the arrival of the Spaniards, so choosing to self-represent in this way heightens public perceptions of indigenous communities as stuck in the past.

The broader term “indigenous” itself tends to be used only in particular settings where it might confer a political advantage—when applying for grants from government organizations or attending meetings of indigenous groups, for example. Few individual *costeños* (coastal denizens) publicly describe themselves as indigenous because they perceive the term to carry a strong social stigma. While highland and eastern lowland groups do use the term, their higher visibility and degree of political organization render the term more advantageous than embarrassing; coastal groups are already discriminated against in nearly every setting, so they are understandably hesitant to choose a label that other *costeños* use as an insult.

Ultimately, whatever specific terminology has been used in a given historical moment or political arena to evoke a categorization or label, it has always served both to disparage coastal indigenous groups and to cast them as intrinsically different from recognized indigenous communities. While many categories of self-representation are clearly available to coastal groups, all incur discrimination in at least some circumstances. Thus there is not a simple way to self-represent without limiting oneself, if one pertains to a non-majority or non-ruling group, because certain things are taken
for granted about each of these constructed categories. But where do those hegemonic ideas come from, and how have coastal identities, narratives, and experiences been erased from ideas of Ecuador?

**Silencing Histories: The Construction of Coastal Invisibility**

In an early publication on changing indigenous economies in the Ecuadorian highlands, sociologist Carlos de la Torre asserted that “the appearance of an Indian middle class calls into question the common Latin American assumption that Indian means the rural, the uneducated, the poor” (1999, 92). In southern Manabí, indigenous groups are, as a whole, rural, uneducated, and poor—yet they, who do fit the stereotypes as a result of a series of structural inequalities, are unrecognized.

As noted in Chapter 1, whiteness as a structural category is constructed in opposition to indigeneity in Ecuador. Coastal groups, however, are marked as non-white in different ways, primarily through labor and social class. The indigenous markers used to identify highland groups—language and distinctive dress—have long been absent here, both for historical reasons and as local strategies of self-preservation within what has frequently been a strongly anti-indigenous nation.

The landscape of southern Manabí, a coastal area whose tropical dry forest just inland rises sharply into mountains covered in dense vegetation, has meant that for most of Ecuadorian history it has been isolated from other regions. As trading and fishing villages during the pre-Hispanic and early Spanish colonial periods, communities in the region were often multilingual (Saville 1907, appendices), an adaptive strategy common among many trading groups worldwide. The Spanish spoken in indigenous communities in southern Manabí incorporates toponyms, zoonyms, and phytonyms from long-lost native languages, but no one in living memory has heard those languages spoken (see also Gómez Rendón 2011).

Because coastal Manabí was difficult to access by land—there were no roads into the area until the 1950s, according to people in Salango and Agua Blanca—most of the outsiders who arrived did so by sea. The availability of a large port in Manta facilitated travel by smaller craft to the areas just south of that town, with smaller fishing ports in Puerto Cayo, Machalilla, Puerto López, and Salango, to name a few (see de la Fuente 2007). Many of the local landowners were Italian or German, interested in exporting tropical crops back to Europe, particularly coffee for consumption and vegetable ivory (tagua) for button manufacture (see Robles 2007). Following practices common to the Andean region since the Spanish colonial period, foreigners who acquired lands in Manabí as a source of raw materials tended to consolidate local communities, using them as laborers within their landholdings.

All these historical processes led to the relative isolation of coastal groups from the rest of the country. No recognizable coastal groups formed part of Ecuador’s national narrative, nor were there any available empty signifiers to be filled with invented traditions (see Barthes 1972; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983): hence the “barren landscape of identity” lamented by Silvia Álvarez. Despite the invisibility of coastal peoples
within the national imaginary, however, they have been categorized over the years, as outlined above, with a number of labels, all of which have different implications within the racialized geography of the nation.

**Manteño**

Official narratives about the Manta and Huancavilca peoples describe them jointly as one of the most advanced civilizations in Ecuador, but as having disappeared in 1532. The Banco Central de Ecuador—the institution that over the past century has invested the most resources in researching, collecting, and displaying Ecuador’s pre-Hispanic remains—presents the group in the past tense, as having existed from “ca. 500–1532 AD” (www.exploringecuador.com/espanol/museum_bce/mante.htm; retrieved March 12, 2006). Even Agua Blanca, a community whose members not only construct their homes on the same platform mounds as their ancestors, but also lead tours through archaeological ruins beginning in their own site museum, is described in the past tense and as having disappeared.

As noted in Chapter 1, official representations of the country by the Ministry of Tourism and the Ministry of the Environment reinforce popular understandings of racialized geography; importantly, neither of their websites mentions any indigenous presence in Manabí province whatsoever. On tourism websites, as outlined in the previous chapter, coastal groups are rarely mentioned; when they are, they are generally described as living in a “rainforest” to which they escaped several centuries ago. Furthermore, as of 2013 there was no mention of indigenous culture in Manabí whatsoever on the tourism sites—all the groups named were located on website maps in the provinces of Esmeraldas and Pichincha.

From the period of land reform and the adoption of the first *Ley de comunas* in 1937 to the early 1980s, as noted above, most indigenous communities from the coastal provinces of Manabí and Guayas were registered with local and state governments as peasant communities with collective landholdings. Between the late 1980s and the early 1990s, however, coastal groups began the process of attempting to gain official recognition by the Ecuadorian state. These initiatives represented a response to several changing circumstances: growth in foreign control of local lands, transformed by buyers into resort-like retreats, large landed estates reminiscent of earlier haciendas, or huge touristic ventures; increasing state and industrial control over some of the coastal lands through the creation of national parks, petroleum processing sites, shrimp farms, fish canneries, and other land-intensive industries; and the growing political efficacy of the coalitions of highland and Amazonian lowland indigenous groups.

Agua Blancans had always maintained connections with a number of other coastal communities through intermarriage and occasional collective work. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, Agua Blancans had been expanding their networks of communication in several ways. When Scottish archaeologist Colin McEwan began nearly a decade of research in the community, most of his workers were Agua Blanca community members. McEwan invited the workers to join him in visits to other archaeological and cultural sites throughout Ecuador, giving them an opportunity
to make connections with indigenous community members from several places. This eventually set the stage for the annual cultural encounters hosted by Agua Blanca in the 1980s, encounters that provided a space in which Agua Blancans could learn directly about some of the organizing taking place in the highlands that would result in the uprisings of the 1990s and beyond. Thus Agua Blancans were involved with the regional conversations from the outset.

Through word of mouth, Agua Blanca and other concerned coastal communities began to convene regular meetings that rotated among several locations. Once enough people were involved, the group decided to ask each participating community to elect one representative to attend a monthly meeting. Eventually, over two dozen communities—from the coast of Manabí south of Manta, to the Santa Elena Peninsula and the southern Guayas coast, to the island of Puná south of Guayaquil—were involved in the group. Although it had begun simply as a series of conversations about regional change and threats to landholdings, at this point the group felt it would be easier to protect their lands as an organization representative of (a) people(s) than as individual communities. The group eventually began organizing more openly as the “Pueblo Manta-Huancavilca-Puná.”

What those attempting to raise general awareness and recognition of coastal groups discovered, however, was that strategies of racialization of Ecuador’s geography within public perception had been exceptionally effective. For a long time, the national indigenous coalitions themselves failed to recognize the legitimacy of indigenous communities on the coast. One conceptual map showing the general locations of indigenous communities in Ecuador was originally published in a volume produced by members of the CONAIE about their ongoing process of organizing the various indigenous nationalities within Ecuador into a coherent political entity. Yet even with political organization as their stated goal, coastal groups from Manabí and Guayas remained unrecognized by the CONAIE (CONAIE 1989). Eventually, on public websites, the organization was described as a pueblo en proceso de autodefinición (people in the process of defining themselves). While creating the organization did raise some awareness of coastal indigeneity as a debate, the lack of broader official recognition of the group and its leadership at times presented new problems for the region, as the following vignette demonstrates.

Returning from an appointment in Manta in June 2005, my husband and I missed the direct bus to Puerto López and had to make a transfer in Jipijapa. About to get on the second bus, we ran into three people he knew from the nearby community of Salango. They looked frantic. We asked where they were going, and they asked us to accompany them to an important meeting. We looked at them and at one another, and agreed.

As we hopped into a taxi heading for an office building toward the center of town, they explained that they had heard rumors that Petroecuador, the national petroleum company, was planning to expand prospecting activity on the coast and was claiming to have the support of local communities. They asked if we had heard anything about this in Agua Blanca, to which we shook our heads to indicate that we had not. One of
the men voiced the concern that, in business as usual, the company was facilitating its own expansion by installing puppet representatives of communities. As he explained quickly, the taxi pulled to a stop outside a concrete-block building.

We headed quickly upstairs, where we could hear a meeting in progress. As we slipped into the room as inconspicuously as possible, I heard a woman’s voice. From her comments, it quickly became clear that she was acting as a representative of Petroecuador, touting the benefits that the state oil company had brought to various regions, in terms both of its local investments in communities and of national progress more generally. The dark-haired woman concluded by inviting one of the men in the front row to join her in addressing the crowd. Dressed in a button-down shirt, bespectacled and with short, well-groomed hair, the man walked over to her; she introduced him as the “elected president” of the “Manteño-Huancavilca Coalition.” At this, audience members looked around the room surreptitiously and began to murmur in small groups. No one seemed to have heard of the man or to recognize him; all appeared to be assessing whether their neighbors were in similar situations.

Standing somewhat nervously beside the Petroecuador representative, the man began to speak in an overly loud voice to the assembly. Claiming already to have spoken with representatives of other communities who appreciated the potential benefits of working with the national oil company, he asked for the current audience’s approval to move forward with the plan. No one responded directly, but the grumbling in the room got louder. Perhaps trying to forestall conflict, the man claimed that all the communities had been invited, and that it was unfortunate how little some groups cared about their own development and progress.

Looking at the men who had invited us, I noticed them mumbling among themselves, looking both annoyed and frustrated, yet clearly loath to speak. I stood and introduced myself, noting that we had just found out about the meeting by accident and that no one from Agua Blanca had been informed, much less invited. The woman tried to dismiss my intervention, asking sharply whether I would be privy to all the workings of the community while openly looking me up and down, drawing attention to my obvious non-local status. Her strategy failed, however, since at that point others began to challenge the authority of the so-called president, whom no one had apparently met.

¿Quién es tu familia? ¿De qué parte vienes? Shouts from all corners of the room addressed the man familiarly rather than formally, clearly threatening his authority and momentarily silencing both the man himself and his companion. Eventually, he replied that he had been working in Quito, which was why they did not recognize him, but that he was originally from “around Montecristi”—somewhere around twenty minutes from the location of the meeting. His failure to address either query directly resulted in a huge shouting match in which it quickly became apparent that no one present knew him—even those who verbally identified themselves as being from the Montecristi area.

Interrupting loudly, the Petroecuador rep shouted that the man was the recognized representative of the Manteño-Huancavilca peoples, and if community
representatives had failed to attend the election it was their own fault, since everyone had been invited.

The man interrupted her, probably seeing that her strategy was not going over well, and shifted topics, heartily promoting the supposed benefits of allowing them in. Individual audience members stood to respond. One complaint—one I had heard in Agua Blanca as well—was that on prior occasions, Petroecuador had clear-cut areas for the pipes delivering light crude from northern wells to the processing plant in La Libertad. Those areas were initially replanted, but most of those plantings had died because of inadequate water. At this, the two representatives promised to replant the areas they cut and even to invest in reforesting the older areas. No one appeared to be convinced, however. This fight went on for some time. My husband and I eventually had to leave to catch the last bus back to the coast.

Obviously, we had been unprepared for the meeting, and I was only able to take short notes on my arm while we were there. I bought a notebook at the bus station and rounded out my impressions of the event in it as we rode down the coast, scribbling in the dark, wanting to record as much as I could recall as soon after it transpired as possible. Despite the late hour of our arrival in Agua Blanca, we immediately went to the home of the cabildo president, and confirmed that he had heard nothing of the new petroleum initiative, the coalition president or his election, or the meeting that day. A day later, the president of Agua Blanca called an emergency town meeting; no one had been made aware of the event, and the community members began to discuss their options, recalling similar engaños (deceptions) by the petroleum corporation in the past.

This event evokes strong similarities not only to meetings described by Suzana Sawyer (2004, 144) between government officials or petroleum executives and Amazonian indigenous communities, but also to some of the broader exclusionary strategies utilized within those meetings. First, Sawyer describes a maneuver whereby government officials select “representatives” of communities or peoples who are not recognized by or known to those peoples, yet who are represented as speaking for those communities; second, she analyzes a strategy in which the attitude is made palpable that merely accepting a meeting with members of a group is enough and hence difficult to protest. In her account, within Ecuadorian politics of the 1990s—overshadowed by the series of indigenous uprisings of 1990, 1992, 1996, and 2001—simply permitting a subaltern group to enter spaces of national government and be recognized could and did take the place of any kind of reciprocal dialogue, negotiation, or even a willingness to listen to the points of view brought up by members of that subaltern group.

President Rafael Correa quickly espoused a pro-indigenous rhetoric upon his election in 2007, intentionally creating the perception of a contrast with prior administrations to bolster his support by indigenous coalitions. Stating as his goal the creation of a more populist and inclusive Ecuadorian nation, Correa not only openly incorporated indigenous representatives into government ministries and other decision-making bodies, but in 2007 also developed the now-infamous Yasuni-ITT
This initiative was part of Correa’s conservationist campaign platform, which he promoted in Kichwa (the indigenous language of the highlands and parts of the Amazonian lowlands) as *Sumaq kawsay*, in Spanish as *Buen vivir* (the good life), referring to the protection of the nation’s biodiversity.

In order to further support his desired image as a people’s president and pro-indigenous leader, Correa made the decision to broadcast biweekly radio chats in which he jokes around while giving updates on government initiatives and opinions on various newsworthy events within national borders. He travels—by plane, but also, at times, by car or boat or even by bicycle—to remote communities, has his team set up broadcast connections, and gives these public discourses—an Ecuadorian, more hands-on version of Roosevelt’s Fireside Chats—seated at a table in front of community members rather than from the austere environs of the Carondelet National Palace.

Initially, CONAIE and other indigenous coalitions in Ecuador supported Correa’s vision of a “Citizen’s Revolution,” but since then, CONAIE leaders have come to reject what they see as veiled policies aimed at reducing indigenous autonomy despite the apparent positive changes mandated in the 2008 Constitution. Anthropologist Carmen Martínez Novo notes that “what social movements are exposing are the contradictions between bodies of legislation or, perhaps, between government discourse and government practices. I propose that we could understand the Constitution as discourse or presentation of the government’s self for international and national consumption, and secondary legislation as being more entangled with the actual practices of government that seem to be more pragmatic” (2010, 3). Martínez Novo’s assessment seems quite accurate. Furthermore, it is not only the autonomy of recognized groups that Correa’s political agenda attempts to thwart; generally unrecognized groups with no political voice and with no history of political visibility are treated by Correa’s government much as Sawyer noted that their highland and Amazonian lowland counterparts used to be treated by non-indigenista regimes.

This kind of strategy, which in terms of its intentions and effects seems not to have changed significantly since the 1990s, allows Ecuador’s political leaders to dismiss subaltern challenges or requests, as they can portray indigenous objectives as having already been met. Momentary, top-down, completely controlled recognition—an event that occurs within one moment and setting and is almost immediately forgotten by the general public, if indeed it is even ever acknowledged—not only takes the place of real give-and-take negotiations, but also precludes such negotiations. Any further noise made by the indigenous groups who have been so graciously received is construed within the tropes of existing negative stereotypes, like colorblindness in the United States (“racism no longer exists, so you must be overreacting”).

In part, it is the persistence of this kind of attitude that leads groups to be wary of accepting definitive labels. In speaking with Agua Blancans over the years, they frequently comment on and even joke about the options available to them for self-identification, and tell stories about the categories to which they have historically been assigned. While at first I understood only the undercurrent of frustration with
the limitations of the categories, it took a series of experiences like the ones outlined above and some of the others I will describe in the rest of the chapter for me to comprehend more viscerally why Agua Blancans find it necessary to develop tactics to avoid fixed labels of racialized identity.

Montubio

montubio, -bia. adj. (S. Am.) Coastal peasant.
(Amer.) An unrefined, coarse, rural person.

Walking into the Pumapungo Museum of the Central Bank of Ecuador in Cuenca for the first time, I was aware that one of its touted attractions was a series of ethnographic displays, dioramas representing the lives and cultural settings of indigenous groups from around the country. I was conversant in the critical discourse surrounding museums and display and collections; I had seen questionable dioramas and reconstructions myself and had even written on these in the past (see also Chapter 1). Given the racialized geography so clearly set up through the progression through the displays, and my own knowledge of which groups were included and excluded from public discourse about that geography, I did not expect to see any coverage of coastal groups. Even had I predicted their inclusion, however, nothing would have prepared me for the scene that awaited me around a corner in the middle of the exhibit.

Upon first glimpsing the exterior of the cane hut in front of me, what struck me was its simultaneous shininess yet haphazard appearance, as if its constructors could not decide on a single design, so felt the need to incorporate everything. I chuckled at the dilemma of the curator: how to feel one has adequately represented every possibility, so as not to lead viewers to a sort of essentialized, monolithic image of the Other. Still amused, I entered the structure as guided by arrows. My light-hearted take on the structure’s exterior left me utterly unprepared for what awaited within (fig. 2.4).

While other groups in the museum are represented in action—hunting, selling goods, dancing, or merely conversing—the montubio is depicted sleeping, not the controlled sleep of the civilized, but the haphazard sprawl of the man too inebriated to control his limbs, one who was unable even to rinse the dust from his legs or remove his hat before collapsing in his hammock in the center of his one-room cane hut. He wears dirty Western-style clothing—a t-shirt, running shorts, and a baseball cap. The walls of his stark abode hold a few cooking utensils and a printed image of a Catholic saint; an incongruous metal-legged desk takes up one corner, a blackened cooking pot on its surface. There is no apparent way to use those cooking vessels, given that there is no fuel source or safe place to cook in the room; the hammock in which he rests would not hold a second body. He is alone.

Historian Ronn Pineo describes highland depictions of montubios as resulting both from a sense of ethnic purity—the highlands as home to white, Catholic, old-money Ecuadorians who maintained close cultural and social ties with Europe—and
from the concomitant understanding of the coastal regions as marked by new money, upstart capitalism, and racial mixing. In Pino’s words, “cultural differences divided Ecuador. To racist whites of the sierra, the swarthy montuvios [sic] of the coast were a bastard race—part European, Indian, and Negro—and living proof of the evils of miscegenation” (2008, 145). Yet even while the isolation and depravity portrayed within the diorama resonate with this set of perceptions, the individual depicted does not appear to be “of a bastard race.” With the exception of dress, all his physical attributes more clearly evoke Ecuadorian expectations of indigeneity.

Perhaps more oddly still, while the scene above suggests moral inferiority, if not depravity, the written description of the category accompanying the exhibit reflects a more typical image of the montubio:

MONTUBIO: Lives inland along the coast and is the symbol of the untamed man braving Ecuador’s tropical nature. His housing settlements are dispersed among the hills or form small population areas on the banks of rivers or next to roadways.

He dresses like the members of other mestizo groups of the coast, with light, simple clothing and a straw hat. He always carries his machete.

Rice, manioc, plantains, fruits, along with hunting and fishing, make up his meals. Agriculture is the primary activity, usually monocropping for export: cacao, coffee, or bananas. Ranching has also developed.
He makes crafts of straw, ceramics, leather, as well as furniture. Stories and legends about beliefs and customs pass from generation to generation.9

The website adds the following: “he likes cockfighting and breaking horses; he loves music and magical oral traditions” (www.bce.fin.ec/etnicosampliar.php; accessed June 30, 2010).10 This image of the montubio—a rodeo-loving traditional farmer dressed in a simple, white button-down shirt and straw hat and carrying a machete—is the typical one reinforced through government census campaigns, political websites, television shows, and posters inviting tourists to experience montubio culture, as I will show in following sections of the chapter. Thus it is interesting that in the national museum of ethnography, where one expects to see all the cultures of Ecuador authoritatively represented, the quintessential gear of the montubio is absent. We see merely a solitary, drunken man in cast-off Western clothing: the mestizo par excellence, the degenerate result of too much intermixing about which castas paintings warned.

**Mestizo: Discourses of Geographic Racialization within the Educational System**

Elementary education everywhere is central to state-sponsored processes of producing citizens. That is, we learn more than the three Rs in school; far more important to national cohesion are the constant lessons in how to be a productive citizen of the nation, and subtle reminders of who belongs in what roles in the national space (see Wilhelm 1995; Luykx 1999; Bourdieu et al. 2000; Rival 2002; Wigginton 2005; Johnson 2007; Godreau et al. 2008). In Ecuador, as everywhere else, children learn what it means to be Ecuadorian and who the ideal Ecuadorian is. Looking at examples taken from state-sponsored textbooks over the past decade reveals both consistency and changes in what recent administrations want children to learn about themselves and about the Ecuadorian state more generally.

Texts teach students that the majority of the population is mestizo; major historical figures were predominantly European in origin, but in more recent years have also been mestizos. Most of the historical figures children can name were born in Quito; very few are associated with rural areas, or even with towns or cities outside the highlands. As we saw in Chapter 1, racialized geography—the idea of who belongs where within the nation—is subtly emphasized throughout one’s education. Geography is not only racialized, however, but also differentially valued: the highlands, centered around Quito and Cuenca, are constructed as the true seats of Ecuadorian culture, whereas the coast is presented as more recently populated, home to new-money industrialists and plantation owners. Amazonia is barely considered other than as a set of resources within national development.

For purposes of this chapter, I want to focus on how the coast itself is constructed as a social space. In the 2010 version of the fourth-grade social studies textbook in Ecuador, coastal growth is explained thus:
At the beginning of the eighteenth century, the coast was a region with very few inhabitants, limited production and very small populations. But great growth began due to an increase in exports of cacao, the fruit from which chocolate is made.

In the province of Guayaquil the cacao haciendas of that port’s landowners grew, where darkies (sambos and mulattos), other coastal mestizos, and indigenous [people] who came from the highlands worked. Next to the haciendas there were small properties of peasants that produced tobacco, plantains, and other foodstuffs. (MEE 2010a, 64; translation and emphasis mine)\(^\text{11}\)

Here the passive voice naturalizes labor-intensive processes, rendering workers invisible: the haciendas grew; small properties produced. Development of the coast is furthermore completely attributed to landowners and external desires. The passage also reinforces an image of the coast as practically devoid of inhabitants, none of whom were autochthonous. Indigenous people in the coastal areas (equated here with Guayaquil) came from the highlands rather than being of local origin. Finally, the language used to describe non-landowners is offensive and emphasizes race and color, equating not only higher socioeconomic status but also moral superiority with whiteness (see Stark 1981; Stutzman 1981; Whitten 1981, 2003a, 2003b; Goldstein 2003; Wade 1995, 1997).

This racialized stratification of social class, particularly for coastal groups, is present throughout several of the texts. In the 2006 third-grade text graphic analyzed in Chapter 1, the series of cartoonish drawings of children that serves to reinforce racialized geography also reinforces class divisions. While each of the children is dressed and adorned distinctly, it is only Pepe, the mestizo from Manabí, whose clothes are dirty and tattered (see fig. 1.2, above). The mestizo child depicted from Cuenca, in contrast, is whiter, dressed in Western clothing, and well-groomed. It is only in Manabí that mestizo is conflated with poor and rural, as well as darker-skinned. Furthermore, as we have seen in the fourth-grade 2006 text already discussed in Chapter 1, this depiction is reinforced through the idea that rural populations are unlikely to be literate.

Interestingly, the definition of coastal regions as solely mestizo has shifted in the most recent (2010) set of texts produced by the Ministry of Education, yet not all years’ texts represent the groups in the same ways. In a section titled “The Cultures of Ecuador,” the eighth-grade social studies text lists the following “peoples and nationalities” for the “coastal natural region”:

In Esmeraldas live the Awá, Épera, [and] Chachi peoples, and a large population of Afro-Ecuadorians. Their ways of seeing the world are different . . .

The montubio people are concentrated in Manabí. The montubio culture gives an account of the way of life of peasants from rural areas.
In Los Ríos, Guayas and El Oro the majority of the population is mestizo.
The Wankavilka people are concentrated in Santa Elena. (MEE 2010c, 178)\textsuperscript{12}

Despite its brevity and straightforward descriptions, this short text includes several points worth noting. First, following the pattern of previous educational documents, it does emphasize a mestizo population in three of the six coastal provinces, a point to which I will return. Second, although both the government and organizations such as the CONAIE generally treat communities identifying as Manteño/Manta and Wankavilka (Huancavilca) jointly, here only one of those communities, the Wankavilka, is mentioned, and is located per the text only in the newly formed province of Santa Elena.\textsuperscript{13} Third, the text not only creates an association between montubios and the province of Manabí, but also, by equating montubios with rural peasants and claiming that they are concentrated in the province, suggests that Manabí itself is almost entirely rural.\textsuperscript{14} Interestingly, several coastal provinces include communities where people do identify as montubio, including Guayas and Los Ríos; nonetheless, those provinces are defined as predominantly mestizo in population. Finally, taken as a whole, the passage suggests that four different kinds of people exist on the coast: mestizos, montubios, Afro-Ecuadorians, and indigenous communities, each of which is located in a different area.

By contrast to this description, the fourth-grade social studies text from the same year (2010), in a section titled “Ethnic groups of our country,” claims that “the great majority of ethnic groups in Ecuador are recognized as indigenous nationalities and peoples. Two peoples stand out: the montubio[s] (Manta-Huancavilca-Puná) and the Afro-Ecuadorian[s]” (MEE 2010a, 51).\textsuperscript{15} This section equates montubios—who are depicted in the 2006 text above as mestizos, and who are distinguished culturally (but not biologically) from mestizos in the 2010 third-grade text—with three separate indigenous ethnicities of the coast; the implication is that those groups are really mestizos, but sometimes prefer to give themselves names of indigenous communities.

Thus even in official representations of the coast within institutions controlled by government entities, a great deal of slippage exists in constructions of coastal identities. Why, though, is this the case? Why not simply call coastal groups mestizo and be done with it?

Estimating Population

One historically significant source of information about how ethnicity is constructed within the national setting is the census (see Anderson 1991; Kertzer and Arel 2002a, 2002b; Nobles 2002). For its first several iterations, while terminology shifted on a few occasions, the underlying Ecuadorian census categories for ethnicity remained fairly constant: white, black, indigenous, mestizo (understood as a person of mixed ancestry not involving Afro-Ecuadorians), mulato (a person of mixed Afro-Ecuadorian and other ancestry), and other (comprising primarily the various immigrant groups
from East Asia and the Arab world). While actual percentages have varied widely, most representations of the Ecuadorian population, both internal and external, have historically posited that Ecuador is predominantly mestizo. The biggest difference in estimates has revolved around the category of “indigenous.”

Andean researchers and indigenous organizations routinely estimate the indigenous population as between 25 percent and 35 percent of the total population (e.g., Cervone 2012, 7). Even after the 2001 census, external sources from world atlases to online data sites such as Index Mundi to the CIA Factbook concurred with these estimates. Significantly, the 2001 census was the first in which people were permitted to auto-identify by ethnicity; in prior census data collection, the collector would assign an ethnicity, presumably based on his or her perceptions of the person being interviewed. Ethnic categories appearing on the last two census questionnaires included indigenous; black (Afro-Ecuadorian); mestizo; mulato; white; or other. If one selected “indigenous,” then he or she was further asked to identify the “indigenous nationality or people” to which he or she belonged.

Results of both the 2001 and the 2010 census were similar: in 2001, approximately 77.5 percent of the nation’s people auto-identified as mestizo, 10.5 percent as white, just under 7 percent as indigenous, just under 3 percent as mulatto, just over 2 percent as black, and 0.32 percent as “other” (INEC 2001). In 2010, after the addition of a new category—montubio—numbers of mestizos and whites went down as some individuals identified themselves within that category (www.eluniverso.com/2011/09/02/1/1356/poblacion-pais-joven-mestiza-dice-censo-inec.html; accessed May 31, 2013). Prior to these two census events, as mentioned above, census officials collecting information in local communities would ask respondents questions about household members, education levels, occupations, and ages, but would answer the question of race or ethnicity themselves (see Lucero 2008, 57)—and in rural Manabí, nearly everyone was assigned to the categories mestizo, montubio, or cholo, all of which imply mixed ancestry, and all of which, in this particular region, also connote poverty, as outlined below.

By contrast in 2001, while numbers of indigenous people declined sharply for many highland provinces, census results for the coastal provinces of Guayas (now Santa Elena) and Manabí for the first time included large numbers of self-identified indigenous people (fig. 2.5)—yet until this census, with the exception of highland indigenous migrants to the port city of Guayaquil, these provinces were thought to be “devoid of ethnicity,” as Ecuadorian anthropologist Silvia Álvarez has put it. Was the change merely semantic or was something else going on?

**Identify Yourself! CONEPIA and the 2010 Census**

One manifestation of the current Ecuadorian state’s discomfiture with the growing recognition of re-emerging coastal indigenous groups is highlighted within the most recent census campaign. In 2010, echoing census changes throughout the region as well as familiar divide-and-conquer strategies in the United States wherein
a (non-white) census category is subdivided when the numbers within it become too large, several more explicit categories were included on the census. In addition, Correa’s government ran a highly visible campaign to urge citizens to identify themselves as members of specific ethnic groups. The campaign reflected both general expectations about particular ethnic groups and specific strategies Correa’s government appears to be employing in attempts to control and limit the ever more powerful and organized indigenous groups within the nation.
¡Autoidentifícate! From its front-and-center position on the Agua Blanca museum’s information booth in early 2011, the poster screamed out at me (fig. 2.6). “Identify yourself! Cultural identity is your right!” My gut response to the exclamation points was more reminiscent of stumbling upon an unexpected military control point than of a joyful celebration of some sort of communal identity. Examining the poster more closely, I noticed an acronym I did not recognize: CONEPIA, the Comisión Nacional de Estadística de los Pueblos Indígenas, Afroecuatoriano y Montubio (National Statistics Commission of the Montubio, Afroecuadorian, and Indigenous Peoples). While the poster exhorted people to self-identify as “proudly indigenous,” the CONAIE was nowhere listed as a supporting organization, so I decided to look into the campaign more closely.

Online in nearby Puerto López, I quickly located CONEPIA’s website. One of the first images I encountered was of a series of individuals, each with paperwork in front of them, seated behind a table wired with microphones. The wall behind them was covered with graphic representations of the different areas of the country. The individuals at the table were themselves highly marked through dress and other accoutrements, clearly meant to be identified with particular regions of the country and their associated ethnic groups: a highland indigenous person in poncho and bowler, a coastal montubio in cowboy hat and bandana, an Afro-Ecuadorian woman marked only through skin tone, and a lowland indigenous person in feathers and body paint. Heading the group, in the left-most chair, sat a bespectacled mestizo in a button-down shirt, the typical office wear of the Western male.

The first question the image on the website raised was why the commission members found it so important to mark themselves in generically racialized ways. The second question was why “indigenous, Afro-Ecuadorian, and montubio peoples” needed their own statistics commission within the Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos (INEC, National Institute of Statistics and Censi). Why was it suddenly necessary for individual Ecuadorians to “auto-identify”? In their recent work on the commodification of ethnicity, John and Jean Comaroff note that the ability to isolate particular markers of authenticity has been essential to the survival of certain groups within processes of globalization. While the benefits of commodifying identity may be obvious to some groups and to particular leaders, however, the question this campaign raised for me was how the same globalizing processes that render commodifying ethnicity a viable option for groups might affect the everyday person who suddenly feels the utter necessity of proclaiming an identity, and one over whose ultimate definition he or she has no real control. Over the next few months many Agua Blancans commented on the prior year’s census questions, wondering why the category of montubio had been added, and what the consequences might be of each of their choices—echoing my response to the site. People who had claimed indigenous identity in the 2001 census were discomfited by the sudden appearance of the new category, and many told me they had opted to claim mestizo identity on the census due to the lack of transparency behind CONEPIA’s campaign.
Figure 2.6. Original poster from Ecuador’s 2010 census campaign. Note the icon for CONEPIA’s campaign, a tripartite figure in which three curved arms protrude from a central image of the sun setting into a blue ocean. The uppermost arm is composed of an image suggesting the head and long black hair of an indigenous woman, a wiphala (indigenous flag) and a boa constrictor in her hair, which intertwines itself with an ear of corn. Below this and to the right, the next arm suggests the head of an Afro-Ecuadorian woman whose hair disappears beneath a headscarf, only to reappear and transform into a brown river in the shape of Africa, within which a marimba, bongos, a canoe and a stalk of sugarcane float. Finally, the third arm is topped by an icon of a montubio of ambiguous gender, complete with hat and red bandana; this head resolves itself into a green banana leaf, atop which three cacao pods, a machete, and a tent appear. (Autoidentificate Ecuador Facebook page. Accessed June 6, 2013; www.facebook.com/pages/Autoidentif%C3%ADcate-Ecuador/1555296144487061?ref=ts)
Propaganda for the campaign was publicized primarily through printed advertisements. In cities, these frequently adorned the sides of buses and troles (electric trains). In smaller towns and rural areas, though, other media were employed. Multiple versions of printed posters were created to target different audiences; these versions were distributed throughout the country based on perceived audience. Interestingly, Agua Blanca officials, like other representatives of indigenous groups, should have received posters focusing on indigenous identity—but early versions of the posters did not include either manta or wankavilka as options in the long list of indigenous nationalities and pueblos or peoples (the latter category implying groups without officially recognized political representation). Posters naming these groups were only made available at the very end of the campaign; posters promoting self-representation as montubio, however, were readily available throughout the months of CONEPIA’s efforts (fig. 2.7).

The montubio poster differs from other examples of CONEPIA’s images in several regards. First, rather than exhorting people immediately to “auto-identify themselves,” the heading of the poster reads, “I have an identity . . . I’m montubio!” The wording insinuates a people long denied a particular identity, yet the image below suggests a longstanding homogeneity in the way that identity might be visually expressed. The plaid shirts, cowboy hats, and red bandanas that adorn the family on the poster are mirrored in the icon of the census-taker below: in media targeting other groups, the cartoon figure simply sports a blue census cap, but on this poster, he is depicted with his own red bandana and Panama hat.

Furthermore, the top of the poster includes a tiny, bearded, and similarly behatted icon under which runs the phrase “Eloy Alfaro lives in the soul of the Montubio People . . .!” Eloy Alfaro, Manabí province’s most famous son, was the 19th and 22nd President of Ecuador. Born in the village of Montecristi, a parochial capital just inland from Manta and approximately 45 kilometers northeast of Agua Blanca, the son of a Spanish merchant and a local indigenous woman, Alfaro led insurrections against various conservative governments in Ecuador, calling for the separation of Church and state and the modernization of the country. While nationally he is remembered primarily for the construction of a railway between the highland capital in Quito and the major port city of Guayaquil, completed in 1908, within rural Manabí he is known as a machete-wielding rebel, a fighting man, and the only president from the province. Still highly popular within Manabí, Alfaro represents the image of the angry rural costeño and consummate revolutionary, a coastal liberal fighting against entrenched highland conservatism dominated by old money and the Catholic Church. Images of Alfaro are common throughout the province; in none of them, however, is he wearing a montubio hat.

In addition to printed materials, CONEPIA ran a similar campaign through television and, more intensively, through radio ads. The ad targeted toward montubio identity both reveals underlying assumptions about montubios, and hints at why people might not self-identify so readily within this category: “I’m a montubio! I have
an identity! Coming from the deep cultural reality of my beautiful coast, I am montubio, yes sir! On horseback, with a sombrero, those are my origins. For Alfaro, for my grandfather and my homeland, in the next national census I will define myself montubio” (CONEPIA 2010b; my transcription and translation). The surreal mental images of backwoods people born on horseback with hats already in place that the radio ads brought to mind were hardly less provocative than the uncanny juxtaposition

Figure 2.7. Montubio poster from the 2010 census campaign. (Autoidentificate Ecuador Facebook page. Accessed June 6, 2013; www.facebook.com/pages/Autoidentif%C3%ADcate-Ecuador/155529614487061?fref=ts)
of CONEPIA’s images of generic indigenous people and the actual indigenous people sitting in front of them, something seen on buses and in public buildings around the country. Why was so much effort and expense being poured into a campaign that appeared to be about raising awareness and recognition of non-mestizo identities in Ecuador?

The many new pueblos named, not only on the posters, but on the maps and in the radio and television ads, appear to signify the far more open, more truly democratic and egalitarian nature of Correa’s government—as they are intended to do. However, the sudden recognition of a montubio identity only ten years after coastal people were given the option of self-selecting ethnic affiliations suggests that other factors might be at play.

**The Creation of CODEPMOC**

The census campaign raises a series of questions. Who are the montubios? Why is the category of montubio distinguished from that of mestizo? Why are other subcategories of mestizo not also officially recognized? When I asked Agua Blancans about this, most had no idea, but two of the more politically aware council members pointed me toward the website of a relatively new organization, CODEPMOC. Officially (and bureaucratically) named the Council for the Development of the Montubio Peoples of the Ecuadorian Coast and Subtropical Zones of the Coastal Region, but better known by its acronym, CODEPMOC was legally created by the Ecuadorian government under President Gustavo Noboa through Executive Decree No. 1394 on March 30, 2001 (www.codepmoc.gob.ec/informacion.php?seccion=gedLXMS&codigo=8eHmDJunvR; accessed March 21, 2013).

Opening the CODEPMOC web page, one’s attention is immediately drawn to the top corner of the screen. Over an orange-red Pacific sunset background, a stylized clockwise-spinning sun rises, grows to fill the screen segment, and then recedes to fill only part of the area. As it shrinks, a new green background resolves into a logo that revolves around the sun, spinning counterclockwise. This logo is made up of five shadow portraits of hatted figures brandishing machetes over their heads; combined in this way, however, at first glance it most resembles a cog, particularly given its rotating motion around the sun, which also appears very gear-like. To complete the image, the name CODEPMOC appears below the revolving logo in red, stenciled letters (fig. 2.8; www.codepmoc.gob.ec/codepmoc.php; accessed June 11, 2012).

The logo suggests that montubios, their green color perhaps symbolizing their position as the backbone of the nation’s exportable agricultural production, work tirelessly under the sun of the Pacific coast. Not only do they work around the clock, they work against it—their motion is counterclockwise, and the sun is setting even as they labor. The stenciled acronym suggests control: the Army-style stenciling is as large as the figures themselves.

Left of the spinning logo is the seal of the Presidency of the Republic, denoting official approval of the organization. To its right, the website includes a banner—a
composite of several color photos, the leftmost of which depict crowds of anonymous, behatted individuals in what might be rallies or meetings (suggesting that all montubios are readily identifiable because they dress exactly alike, and that all belong to this organization), and the rightmost of which depict fewer, similarly dressed individuals in agricultural fields, working with hoes and their paradigmatic machetes. In none of the images is any individual recognizable; rather, the image suggests a clearly identifiable yet anonymous labor force.

In coastal lore, montubios, particularly those from certain regions of Manabí, are historically known for being tough fighters, both politically and within local skirmishes. The potentially frightening image of large numbers of montubios brandishing large machetes has been watered down, however, by the ways montubio has been glossed and represented recently in the national media. The television comedy show *Los Compadritos* portrays montubios as ridiculous, brash individuals, ignorant of what might constitute good manners or cultural expectations. The *compadritos* depicted are never without their iconic sombreros, whether at a pajama party, a wedding, or swimming in the ocean; far from frightening, they cannot be taken seriously. Similarly, after a 2009 outbreak of *fiebre aftosa* (hoof and mouth disease) resulted in the quarantine of Ecuadorian beef products, the government launched a vaccination campaign to try to eradicate the disease. A commercial on the topic aired almost continually that featured two sombrero-and-bandana-wearing men, one of whom berates his neighbor, Don Esculapio (ironically named after the Greek god of medicine), not to forget to vaccinate his wayward cattle. Again, the dominant message is that these people are simple, rural folk, not to be taken seriously.

Below the main banner on CODEPMOC’s webpage, a subheading panel reads:

Modelo de Desarrollo Endógeno

... *PRODUCIMOS LIMPIO Y SANO!*
*Somos un pueblo portador de una cultura bicentenaria.*
Endogenous Development Model

... *WE PRODUCE CLEAN AND HEALTHY!*
We are a people [who are] bearers of a two-century-old culture. [ellipses in original]

I include the Spanish original here because of the slippage inherent in the terminology selected. Most important is the uncommon, and relatively unfamiliar, term *endógeno.*
It is a word I have never heard anyone use in everyday speech in Manabí; most people I asked were not sure of its definition, and some asked if I might have made it up, or translated it from English.

Both definitions given in the 2005 *Espasa-Calpe Dictionary of the Spanish Language* refer to biological processes:

**Endogenous**
1. Adjective. That which originates or is born in the interior, as a cell which forms within another cell.
2. That which originates due to an internal cause: an endogenous infection.

(www.wordreference.com/definicion/end%C3%B3geno; accessed June 23, 2011; my translation)

While the term implies something internal to a larger body, it refers to “that which is born in the interior,” which in Spanish also implies “in the middle of nowhere,” “in the deep countryside.” Within the racialized and differentially valorized geography of Ecuador, *el interior* implies areas marked as non-white, non-urban, non-modern—and generally invisible, as el interior is not directly marketed to tourists; its remoteness does not imply tranquility, a haven for world-weary urbanites, but merely remoteness, backwardness, somewhere not only geographically but also philosophically and developmentally removed from the civilized and civilizing space of the city.

To continue with the official definition, the example given of something endogenous is “a cell which forms within another cell”—in political terms, a cell that is not greater than the nation, not concomitant with the nation, but posterior and inferior to that nation. This is similar to the official language used to describe the nation more generally: Ecuador is pluricultural, not plurinational (Sawyer 2004; see also Chapter 1). The nation’s government is willing to recognize the diversity within its borders, but not at the expense of its sovereignty.

Something endogenous is further defined as “originating in internal causes, as an endogenous infection.” Beyond the negative tone inherent in “infection,” the term *endogenous* thus also subtly implies that the organization arose organically from within the montubio community, a diversionary tactic drawing attention from the government’s role in reinventing and promoting montubio traditions, organizations, and cultural events. Belying this aspect of the definition, the phrase “Endogenous Development Model” (which can alternatively be translated as “A Model of Endogenous Development”) sounds very stilted; it seems to reflect a government’s desire to encourage a specific kind of development, one that can be marketed in particular ways (as organic, healthy, clean), rather than something actually developing organically from within.

Finally, the term recalls the very similar-sounding *indígena*; when I asked Agua Blancans what the word *endogenous* meant, the few who hazarded a guess suggested it might be another way of saying indigenous—something close to the actual definition. Given the promotion of the category of montubio within indigenous communities
in the recent census campaign, the similarities of the two terms may be the primary reason for its selection. However, the final phrase, “We are the bearers of a two-century-old culture,” places arbitrary limits on those similarities. Again, the specific wording of the phrase is unusual. Rather than “we are the people of a culture,” it states that “we are a people who carry a culture.” The possibility presented is that culture is not necessarily inherent in us; we may be carrying it for someone else. Furthermore, that culture, itself unnamed and unspecified, is defined as only two centuries old—not millennia old, as local indigenous cultures would be. Given the ubiquity of the phrase *cultura milenaria* in reference to indigenous groups in Ecuador, the word choice is particularly telling.

Clicking on a link within a left-hand sidebar titled “Nuestra Identidad” (Our Identity) takes a website visitor to an artistic collage of text against a green background, interspersed with images that provide glimpses of montubio life. These iconic images include two figures fabricating Panama hats; a multi-age group seated on the ground listening to an older, behatted man in a hammock playing guitar; a *rodeo montubio*; and a parade where girls in montubio hats and green colonial-style dresses presumably present a folkloric dance in front of a banner reading “Gestiones de identidad cultural” (*www.codepmoc.gob.ec/index.php?seccion=EixdaTs*; accessed June 12, 2012). The word *gestión* has several meanings, most referring to bureaucratic procedures; the banner could be translated either as “Steps toward a cultural identity” or “Management of cultural identity,” but most coastal Ecuadorians would probably read it as “Requests for a cultural identity.”

The text on this portion of the webpage reads (in translation):

What is the *montubio* group of people [*pueblo montubio*]? It is a group of individuals who are organized as and who define themselves as *montubio,* with features characteristic of the coastal region and subtropical zones, who are born naturally as a social-organic unit blessed with a common spirit and set of ideals, possessing a natural and cultural education that molds them [*que los auto determina*] as the result of a long spatiotemporal process, and who maintain their own cultural traditions and ancestral knowledges.

We are a people carrying a bicentennial culture. The *montubio* is the result of a complex historical process of ethnic, interregional and sociocultural adaptation and transformation which occurred along the coast where Indians, whites, and blacks fused together; from this fusion we *montubios* have come, with our own cultural identity and specific reality, which distinguishes us from mestizos and peasants [*campesinos*] from the highlands and other peoples of this country.

We are the sociocultural and historic product of the fusion of different racial, regional and cultural groups [*etnias*] who went about fusing [*que se fueron fusionando*] together throughout the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, with that process of fusion reaching its completion at the beginning of the nineteenth century. (*www.codepmoc.gob.ec/codepmoc/nuestra-identidad*; accessed June 12, 2012)
One striking aspect of this description is its disjointed nature, skipping back and forth between the third person singular (“the montubio is”) and the first person plural (“we are”). The very first question asks *what* the group is, rather than *who* the people are. All of this suggests an external definition of the group; no one would be likely to describe herself and her family in the third person, as “the result of a complex historical process of ethnic, interregional and sociocultural adaptation and transformation which occurred along the coast.”

Verbs and adjectives themselves frame the definition oddly within two discourses at odds with one another. Some terms naturalize the montubio presence within a landscape and a history (*propia, naturalmente, formación natural y cultural, ancestral*, etc.); others, taken from the language of science and industry (*resultado, fusión* several times, *proceso*), suggest again that the group has been externally created. While the first set of words reinforces racialized geography, the second set clearly emphasizes that montubios are distinct from other mestizos and campesinos, but also from indigenous groups—montubios are defined as a “fusion” of “Indians, whites, and blacks” in a description strongly reminiscent of a scientific or chemical equation, a sort of alchemy whereby distinct metals are fused into a new alloy.20

The abundant use of the term *fusion*, which appears in some form five times on the page, suggests the melding of separate nuclei to create power: the merging of different elements through heat to create a new entity. In most settings, however, elements do not naturally fuse together. The term usually refers to laboratory experiments, creative cooking, or other processes that result in fusion through external human intervention. Again, differently racialized groups in Ecuador are perceived also in terms of labor—both in the sense that they are defined by their labor and in the sense that their labor defines them, both metaphorically, in that groups come to be perceived as “suited” for particular kinds of labor, and physically, in the ways work and other activities shape the body. The terminology on the CODEPMOC website suggests that these various elements have been combined in ideal ways to create a new labor force, naturally suited for agricultural work beneath the burning Pacific sun.

Finally, the page concludes that the “process of fusion reach[ed] its completion at the beginning of the 19th century.” Again, the website utilizes scientific terminology to describe utterly unscientific conclusions: first, that clear biological distinctions separated the original groups who later fused to create montubios; second, that the genetic makeup of the category of *montubio* is the same for everyone and can be defined with mathematical precision; and third, that the process of fusion somehow stopped, reaching a conclusion two centuries ago. Interestingly, the timing mirrors that of the creation of the Ecuadorian nation—the move for independence began in the early nineteenth century, along with the emphasis on a narrative of mestizaje. Thus coastal agriculturalists are once again by definition distinguished from the nation’s mestizo leadership, but also separated (scientifically, genetically, historically, culturally, and definitionally) from the possibility of indigeneity. The montubio category serves as yet another diversionary tactic, a maneuver attempting to create arbitrary
and problematic connections among otherwise very disparate coastal communities. Indigenous communities on the coast, encouraged to auto-identify as montubio, are loath to do so: even more so than other racialized categories in Ecuador, this one conveys a fixity that, once accepted, would be difficult to abandon.

**Coastal Communities and Imperfect Mestizaje**

The high visibility of Ecuador’s indigenous coalitions within political processes over the past two decades have played a central role in recent changes in discourses and praxes of indigeneity in Ecuador, visible within academic approaches to the region and tangible within indigenous communities themselves. Perhaps counterintuitively, this situation—a significant increase both in indigenous efficacy and in attention to praxes of indigeneity within Ecuador—has created new dilemmas for unrecognized groups, because it is easy to assume that all indigenous groups face similar stressors and have similar relations with the government.

Racialized geography significantly limits the kinds of labels coastal groups can persuasively use for self-identification. Existing limitations have been exacerbated by recent emphasis on the montubio category. As I have shown in this chapter, under the government of Rafael Correa, several initiatives—the 2010 census campaign, televised and radio-broadcast public service announcements, language and images used to promote regional tourism, and revisions to scholastic texts—have all contributed to a broader strategy designed both to create public perceptions of increasingly visible coastal groups as montubio and to pressure rural coastal individuals to self-identify as montubio.

Within the categorization of the nation into the hierarchies of imperfect mestizaje, the montubio category is specifically constructed as fundamentally distinct from and not subsumable within the other available categories, as I have shown above. Although definitions given by the state presume those labeled as montubio to have indigenous, black, and white ancestry, importantly, montubio is constructed as different from mestizo and, simultaneously, as categorically distinct from any of its presumed component parts, both biologically and culturally. Thus as a category it is quite limiting; the recent visual equation of montubio with laboring bodies renders the category even less appealing to many coastal indigenous communities.

While some groups—usually in the riverine interior of the provinces of Manabí, Guayas, and Los Ríos—do identify as montubio, these have long been part of the national or at least the regional imaginary: hotheaded cowboys with green eyes, huge ranches, and the ability to use their machetes in politics as well as in their agricultural exploits. Recent processes of recovering traditional identities in the region have led some agriculturalists—and even some nostalgic urbanites—to reclaim their montubio roots. Those individuals who do claim this heritage and who do currently choose to self-identify as montubios despite the historically negative connotations of the term would not, however, recognize Agua Blancans or their peers as montubios. Thus
accepting state pressure to identify as montubio would sever many of the connections Agua Blancans maintain with their own peers without replacing those ties with other kinds of belonging.

Accepting a label of montubio would also render the land claims of communities such as Agua Blanca far more easily contestable; state definitions themselves describe the montubio as the result of a process of racial mixing that is only a couple of centuries old—more or less the age of the nation, rather than preceding the nation in emergence. This denotation implies that any land claims would be based on recent tradition rather than autochthony.23

Most importantly, the label itself implies again an imperfect mestizaje, a category of mestizo intrinsically separated from the white-mestizo political and economic elite, but also distanced in time, genealogy, and culture from the “disappeared” indigenous groups of the coast. Of all the categories of self-identification available to coastal groups, this one is perhaps the most limiting; thus it is perhaps not coincidental that it is the category most forcefully being presented to those groups as an option. Furthermore, even though imperfect mestizaje might appear to enable fluidity, the fact that the originators of the discourse are also its gatekeepers mean that the various labels and distinctions alluded to within the broader discourse of mestizaje can be just as limiting as the label of “Indian,” but without the possibility of engaging with and benefiting from the global cachet of indigeneity.

**Ambiguity as Flexibility?**

Within rural coastal Ecuadorian communities, group self-definitions have frequently changed in response to shifting state policies and governments. While groups are theoretically permitted to represent themselves as they see fit, ironically, all of the available categories for self-definition reify inherent difference from the mainstream. In other words, groups perceive the need to define themselves in ways that preclude their full and active participation in democracies, yet it is only due to the existence of those democracies in the first place that such definitions become necessary. Self-definitions take on the role of moral imperatives, fomenting ideas about how people are, not just who they are, and forcing groups to choose between pride and political efficacy. To ensure their continued rights within the Ecuadorian democracy, these groups are encouraged to define themselves in ways that lead to their exclusion from important aspects of a democracy.

This is a clear example of a negative freedom in Bourdieu’s sense of the term—groups appear to be given the freedom of choice in self-representation, but only within a limited list of available identities, all of which are perceived as marginal; groups are not permitted to come up with new categories. In accepting external definitions of themselves that are acceptable to the state, these groups would only continue to emphasize their isolation rather than their inclusion in the nation. Given how each of the available categories has been constructed historically and more recently,
how each plays into that national imaginary, and how the tropes of racialized geo-
graphy that guide Ecuadorian perceptions of people and space already constrain Agua
Blancans and their peers, the adoption of any of the categories as representative of
one’s own communal identity would constrain a group severely.

Coastal communities in Ecuador, as elsewhere in the Andean nations, occupy
an ambiguous ethnic space. Long unrecognized as indigenous communities, neither
are coastal peoples typically mestizo: their labor marks them physically in ways the
mestizo majority neither embodies nor wishes to emulate. This conundrum can
play out in different ways, as I have already noted. Traveling along the long, rural
roads through Manabí, one does not see many people; visiting beaches and national
parks, one does not expect to see people who are not tourists. Most frequently, then,
coastal communities find themselves rendered invisible. In circumstances where visi-
bility cannot be avoided, as Agua Blanca president Paúl noted in our conversation
described earlier, coastal communities have been officially labeled “Afro-Ecuadorian”
or simply “traditional peoples,” a maneuver of imprecision, of sidestepping the deeply
political issue of ethnic identity in Ecuador. However, as I will argue in the rest of the
book, this very imprecision can enable more control and flexibility in self-definition
than would otherwise be the case.