Chapter 3

From Bilwi to Puerto Cabezas

Mestizo Nationalism in the Age of Agro-Industry

It is greatly to be hoped that the scholars of Nicaragua, who have rightly preserved in some form the native Indian names of the Western part of the country, will adopt the native names of Eastern Nicaragua also, undisguised and undisfigured, as part of the national heritage; and beyond all doubt, the unreserved recognition of these names would help to cement the unity of the nation. Where native Indian names exist, they should never be superseded by either Spanish or English nomenclature. Let us have done with Rio Grande and Great River both alike, and say only Awaltara, or better still Awoltara; let us abolish alike Bragman’s Bluff and Puerto Cabezas and say only Bilwi. Let us revive the old name of Auya for Little Sandy Bay; of Akiwita for Wounta Haulover, and Iniwas or Iniwaska for Wawa Saw Mill, where for 2 decades the old sawmill has ceased to exist.

—George Heath

In the above quotation, North American linguist George Heath calls on Nicaraguan scholars to perform the ideological work of promoting the use of Mosquito Coast indigeneity, in this case the use of Indian place names, for the purpose of cementing Nicaraguan nationalism on a coast-to-coast basis (Heath 1927, 88). Throughout Latin America, national governments have historically promoted the use of indigenous toponyms as a way of inscribing a vision of national identity that would incorporate both Indian and Spanish imagery in the
construction of Euro-American Mestizo nationalism. In the case of eastern Nicaragua the matter was made more complicated and contentious by virtue of the fact that the region’s natives, and its toponyms, were deeply influenced by their interaction with the English-speaking Caribbean world. This made their indigeneity suspect for the purposes of the creation of Nicaraguan Mestizo nationalism. Such was the case for tiny Bilwi, which, despite Heath’s urging, continues to be known officially as Puerto Cabezas.

At the turn of the century, Bilwi, as Puerto Cabezas is called in Miskitu, represented one of a long string of small fishing villages that extended up and down the Mosquito Coast. Starting in 1921 a consortium of New Orleans companies, one of which would soon become the Standard Fruit Company, rapidly began to establish a multimillion-dollar banana and lumber operation complete with a lumber mill, a pier, port facilities, and a railroad. Soon the village of Bilwi, renamed Puerto Cabezas by the Nicaraguan government, experienced a stage of momentous growth and transformation that was not foreshadowed by its bucolic past. Over the next ten years it was briefly made the provisional capital of Nicaragua. It was militarily occupied by the US Marines—twice. It even saw the opening of a British consular office, a US consular office, and the regional headquarters of a missionary church. In the meantime the Bragman’s Bluff Lumber Company became the largest employer in all of Nicaragua, and the town grew in size from a population of under 100 (mostly native Costeños) to over 5,000 (including North Americans, West Indians, Pacific Nicaraguans, and Costeños from other parts of the Mosquito Coast) (Karnes 1978, 115).

The tumultuous events of the interwar years of the twentieth century in Puerto Cabezas brought into focus, primarily for two reasons, the profound political implications of the Blackness and Indianess of Costeños as perceived by Pacific Nicaraguans, who for the first time were establishing the direct control of the region by the Nicaraguan state. The first reason was that the lumber and banana companies brought in many Black workers from the West Indies and the US South, who were perceived by the agents of the Nicaraguan state as a foreign and alien threat to the Nicaraguan nation-building process, which was predicated on Mestizo nationalism. The influx of Black workers, many of whom possessed skills that put them at a rank above Nicaraguan and
Costeño workers, served to reinforce and transform the Creole category. The second reason was that the operations of North American companies required control over large tracts of land. This increased demand in a region where land pressure was minimal and land tenure arrangements were poorly formalized inevitably led to land disputes between and among communities that held title to the land as Indians.

In this chapter I analyze the contexts in which appeals to cultural and racial difference were made by inhabitants of Puerto Cabezas in their efforts to retain control over the city in the face of the massive assault by US companies and the Nicaraguan state. I also analyze the views of Pacific Nicaraguans and North Americans with regard to the race and culture of Costeños that ultimately conditioned their responses to the conflicts in the region.

As a result of the historical separation between eastern and western Nicaragua, Costeños entered into the twentieth century possessing particular attitudes and loyalties towards Spain, England, Nicaragua, and the United States; the Spanish language and the English language; and Spanish and Nicaraguan culture, and Anglo-American culture. In general, Costeños associated progress and civilization with English and North American customs and institutions, and regarded Central American nations as unstable, antagonistic, and in many ways inferior. Contrarily, Pacific Nicaraguans regarded the inhabitants and institutions of the Atlantic Coast as backward culturally, economically, and racially. This ideological rivalry represents a key element of the context in which the controversies that arose from the penetration of powerful North American and Nicaraguan actors in the city must be understood.

In the first section of this chapter, I chronicle the struggle over land that occurred between the Nicaraguan government, the Standard Fruit Company, and the communities of Karatá and Bilwi. The leaders of Bilwi faced a peculiar dilemma as they asserted their rights as Indians to negotiate with foreign companies on the matter of land use and ownership to a Nicaraguan government that was ideologically hostile to such demands. Costeños as cosmopolitans were ideologically predisposed to welcome the connection to the Anglo-Caribbean world that the companies represented, but in order to deal with these companies most effectively, they needed to do so, to some degree, as Indians. For the Nicaraguan state, the all-powerful role of the US companies was an
affront to Nicaraguan nationalism that needed to be opposed by a strong, sovereign, and unified Nicaraguan state—not Miskito Indians. The most extreme manifestation of Nicaraguan nationalist opposition to the US companies was renegade Liberal leader Augusto Sandino’s attack on company installations and personnel in 1931.

In this chapter I pay particular attention to the issue of Pacific Nicaraguan perceptions towards Costeños and the Mosquito Coast. Given that at the turn of the century, Pacific Nicaraguans were for the first time exercising governmental authority in the Atlantic Coast, creating a power differential between Costeños and Pacific Nicaraguan authorities, the perceptions regarding each other held by Costeños and Pacific Nicaraguans became particularly charged. I construct a critical reading of the Nicaraguan national project in the Mosquito Coast by analyzing the statements and decisions of an important Nicaraguan official who played a crucial role in the establishment of Nicaraguan governmental authority in the new port city of Puerto Cabezas. Continuing with this issue of Pacific Nicaraguan ideology vis-à-vis the Atlantic Coast, I focus on another major player in the history of Puerto Cabezas: the Nicaraguan revolutionary leader Augusto Cesar Sandino, who despite his revolutionary credentials manifested a distinctly colonialist approach to the Mosquito Coast’s Costeños.

Bragman’s Bluff:
A Nicely Situated Place

In Managua on January 28, 1921, Leroy T. Miles, a US citizen representing the Salmen Brick and Lumber Company and the Vacarro Bros. Inc. of New Orleans, signed an agreement with the Nicaraguan government that would dramatically change the course of history in the distant Mosquito Coast settlement of Bilwi. At the turn of the twentieth century, Bilwi, a coastal village ten miles north of the Wawa River and sixty miles south of the mouth of the Coco River, was even on regional standards an unimportant village. It did not play a significant role as a port in the coastal export-oriented economy, which at the turn of the century was based primarily on lumber. In the northern sector, lumber and other natural resources were extracted by way of the three major rivers (Prinzapolka, Wawa, and Coco), each of which had ports on or around their mouths. Cape Gracias a Dios, at the mouth of the Coco
River, had long been the major port of the northern Mosquito Coast, while other villages sprang up along these rivers to meet the needs of the extractive industries.  

Although the relatively poor soils around Bilwi historically had prevented it from sustaining a larger indigenous population, Bilwi’s strategic position on the ridge of the only significant promontory on the northern Mosquito Coast had long attracted English traders to the place, which they named “Bragman’s Bluff” (De Kalb 1893, 249). The earliest mention of permanent habitation of the place appeared in the account of M.W., an English pirate who visited the Mosquito Coast at the end of the seventeenth century. M.W. claimed that Thomas Arkes and John Thomas, two English buccaneers who were refugees from a historic English raiding party that sacked Nueva Segovia in 1674, lived a “pagan” life there among forty “savage” Indians, some of whom served them as slaves and prostitutes (Romero Vargas 1995, 274; Naylor 1989, 40).

Before the British evacuation of 1787, Bragman’s Bluff represented one of the eight permanent English settlements in the region, along with Black River, Cape Gracias a Dios, Sandy Bay, Walpa Sixa, Great River, Pearl Lagoon, and Bluefields. Out of a total of fewer than five hundred permanent English settlers in the entire region, only Sandy Bay had fewer English residents than Bragman’s Bluff, which had six (Potthast 1988, 231). Although the English settlement at Bragman’s Bluff undoubtedly attracted native people of the region (some of whom stayed involuntarily as one of seventy Black and Indian slaves), the largest Costeño populations inhabited other villages, the closest and most important of which, Twappi, was located three miles to the north and was the home of the Mosquito governor.

After the British evacuation of the region, Bragman’s Bluff appears to have been continuously occupied until the present. In the nineteenth century, historical sources began to identify an Indian village at the site called “Bilwi.” As previously noted, in the nineteenth century the racial identification of Costeños began to bifurcate towards either end of a Black-Indian ideological spectrum. Southern villages, with their “capital” at Bluefields, increasingly came to be identified as Creole. Northern villages, which in the past had often been identified with mixed Black/Indian peoples known, among other things, as Zambos
Mosquitos, came to be regarded generally as Indian. Such was the case for Bilwi, a northern village.5

In 1849 the British vice-consul mentioned Bilwi as one of the stops that he, along with the reigning Mosquito king, George Augustus Frederick, made on their rounds of the Mosquito Kingdom (Oertzen, Rossbach, and Wunderich 1990, 127). Two German Moravian missionaries on a reconnaissance trip in May of 1859 wrote: “At 11 O’clock we arrived at Billwi, a nicely situated place of only about 9 houses, and disembarked. We then paid a short visit to the inhabitants and by 3 O’clock we had thrown the anchor close to the village of Twappi” (ibid., 145). Bilwi appeared in missionary and other reports later in the century, but it was always regarded as a middle-sized or small-sized Indian village (ibid., 172, 176, 239). Writing in 1896, British Vice-Consul Herbert Harrison placed Bilwi in a regional perspective: “The Wawa River flows into the north of the Karata Lagoon, and there are many villages and settlements in this district, including Yulu, with upwards of 500 Indians, Kilina, Twappi, Krukira, with over 100 Indians each, and the smaller settlements of Shoubia, Bilwi and Auyia Pini” (ibid., 425).

Despite its small size, representatives from Bilwi did appear at the major late-nineteenth-century meetings between the government of Nicaragua and the Atlantic Coast villages that were at this time being affected by the gradual establishment of Nicaraguan sovereignty in the region. This Nicaraguan encroachment intensified in 1860 with the creation of the “Mosquito Reserve” and was punctuated by the 1894 invasion of the region by Nicaraguan troops. This invasion put an end to the English-supported independence of the Mosquito Coast vis-à-vis the Nicaraguan state and the preceding Spanish colonial government. After 1894 leaders from Bilwi consistently asserted their rights to obtain legal titles to communal lands and signed various petitions protesting their exploitation at the hands of the Nicaraguan government.

During the nineteenth century, as the institutions of the Mosquito government became increasingly regularized, it commonly staged “Public Conventions of the Headmen of the Mosquitos.” Native “headmen” traveled from all over the coast to Bluefields to represent their communities and give legitimacy and the appearance of popular support to the decisions of the Mosquito government. At the death of “Hereditary Chief” George William Albert Hendy in 1888, the Mosquito Municipal
Authority called such a convention to elect a successor. Headmen from twenty-two Costeño communities attended, including a representative from “Bilway” named “Allick” (Oertzen, Rossbach, and Wunderich 1990, 354). In 1891 Bilwi sent Andrew and Alexander as representatives to the election of Robert Henry Clarence, the last Mosquito chief (ibid., 357). At the controversial 1894 Mosquito Convention, in which the government of Nicaragua officially annexed the country of Mosquito, Andrew Wita was present as “Alcalde and Delegate,” and Pabas and Pax also attended as “Delegates” (ibid., 393).

After the so-called Reincorporation of 1894, leaders from Bilwi consistently asserted their right to obtain legal titles to communal lands and signed various petitions protesting their exploitation at the hands of the Nicaraguan government. Before 1894 individual Costeño villages had never been compelled to obtain legal title to lands, but the encroachment of the Nicaraguan government spurred them to attempt to formalize their control over the lands that they had historically occupied and used. Britain, whose interests happened to coincide with those of the people of Mosquito, exerted its influence on the behalf of Costeños, both Indians and Creoles, who were struggling to insure that the Nicaraguan government would respect their land rights.

The 1905 Harrison-Altamirano Treaty between Great Britain and Nicaragua guaranteed the right of Indians and Creoles of the former country of Mosquito to acquire and possess title to private and communal lands. Each family would have the right to obtain eight acres of land, and each Indian “community” would acquire titles to “public pasture lands.” The stipulations of this treaty with regard to land were not formally put into practice until 1915. In that year the Nicaraguan government created a special “Comisión Tituladora” (Land Titles Commission) to measure Costeño communal lands (Jenkins Molieri 1986, 288). Many Costeño communities succeeded in receiving land titles through this commission, although many others did not. They cited corruption and negligence on the part of Nicaraguan officials and the prohibitive expenses involved in surveying land. Costeño leaders repeatedly expressed their grievances to both the British and US governments (US Department of State Records 817.52/16, 17).

While many individual Miskito communities all over the Mosquitia scrambled to survey and register lands, some of northern Miskito Indian
communities banded together to make a single land claim. The Wawa River District communities of Kambla, Twappi, Krukira, Yulu Tingni, Bum Sirpi, Auyapihni, Sisín, Kuakuil, Sangni Laya, and Bilwi (which together for the purposes of land titles were called the “Diez Comunidades,” or Ten Communities) petitioned the Land Titles Commission for 10,000 acres of agricultural land and 10,000 acres of pasture land. The agricultural land was to be located along both banks of the Wawa River from Tabalaya to Walpatara and Snakie to Arrawas.

In 1916 the Land Titles Commissions granted the Ten Communities titles to all 10,000 acres of pasture land claimed, while giving titles to only 1,080 acres of agricultural land (US Department of State Records 817.52/35). In the years from 1915 to 1923 the Nicaraguan government made three attempts to survey and title the remaining land. Initially a French surveyor living in Bluefields undertook the task, but due to lack of funds from the government, he did not continue. A North American engineer also received the assignment with the same results. Finally, in the early 1920s, a Nicaraguan civil engineer, George Sequeira, attempted to complete the survey. By this time, however, the land in question, which the Nicaraguan government valued little, came under the covetous gaze of a party much more powerful than the Ten Communities villages. This party was Leroy T. Miles and his New Orleans backers, who, according to the US consul in Bluefields, “interposed and Sequeira returned without doing anything” (US Department of State Records 817.52/17; see also 817.52/35).

The contract that Miles signed with the Nicaraguan government in 1921 authorized broad tax exemptions and granted a concession of 20,000 hectares of “national lands” at $2 per hectare. While the enterprise initially focused on lumbering, the investors also hoped that banana production could parallel lumber extraction and take advantage of the same infrastructure, such as railroads and port facilities. Indeed, the Bragman’s Bluff Lumber Company, the name given to the company, was founded with New Orleans capital from both a lumber company (Salmen Brick and Lumber Company) and a fruit company (Vacarro Bros. Inc.). Vacarro Bros. Inc. would later (1926) become the Standard Fruit Company of New Orleans (Karnes 1978, 106–142).9

Due to this dual interest, Miles and his associates desired lands both on the banks of the Wawa River, where the fertile land is ideal for
banana plantations, and the pine savannas of the interior. The contract between Miles and the Nicaraguan government stated: “By virtue of the Powers contained in the Agriculture law the Government will order suspended any denouncement of land which may have been made or may be made in the region that the contractor [Miles] desires which is that region situated north of the Wawa River, five to twenty miles from the coast and surrounded by National lands except on the east, where there are lands belonging to the Miskitos” (US Department of State Records 817.6172/1). Thus the Nicaraguan government granted Miles almost unlimited discretion in selecting lands, some of which the government and Miles knew were used, inhabited, and in the process of being legally claimed by various Miskito communities. It is not surprising to discover that this situation soon began to generate friction between the company and the Ten Communities.

Given that the special rights to land that Costeño communities enjoyed had resulted from a treaty between Great Britain and Nicaragua, Costeño leaders quite logically appealed to the British government for their defense. In a letter signed in Twappi and dated August 20, 1923, the “syndices” of six out of the “ten communities” (a representative from Bilwi did not sign the letter) wrote to the British vice-consul in Bluefields:  

Under the Harrison Altamirano Treaty, we the Indians of Twappi, Sis Sin, Kukera, Apenie, Boom, Licos, were granted certain lands from Tublaya to Walpatara and from Snaki to Arrowas. Gomez and Lyman came up and measured these lands and we were given titles which was supposed to cover these lands.

We understand the Mr. Miles is taking these same lands that were given to us and we would ask your good offices in protecting our rights. At the time, also the Government was supposed to measure these lands at their expense, though now they want us to pay for the same measurement, or the checking up of the original measurement.

We are poor people and have not enough means to pay this additional expense and also to fight Mr. Miles from taking up our lands, and hope that you in your official capacity will be able to give us the protection of these lands that were given to us in the treaty signed by the English and Nic. Government.
We thank you for the efforts, we know you will take in our behalf. (US Department of State Records 817.52/35)

The British government eventually took action on their behalf, recommending to both the United States and Nicaragua that a special international tribunal be formed to insure that the international agreements regarding the Miskito Indians and Creoles would be respected. The United States consul and the Nicaraguan government agreed to sit on such a tribunal (ibid.).

The leaders of the Ten Communities, cognizant of their legal predicament, defended their land claims within a national and international political and legal order. They hired a lawyer, Charles Casanova, to argue their case in Bluefields. Casanova, who in his own words represented “several Indians and Indian communities of this coast,” wrote the following to the British consul in Bluefields in a letter dated August 17, 1923:

I am almost sure that if at least these Indian communities were governed by their own chiefs who understand their dialect and who are one with them in religion and custom, a provision which is amply made in the Treaty, we should have a more law abiding people, and above all, the shameful case of bloodshed and other outrages that from time to time occur on the Wanks River especially, would be avoided. It is simply a repetition of history to exact that the transition of people from one people to another who are different in every respect, should be done gradually and not at rapid strides as is our case, because the result is a degenerated and criminal hord [sic] of lawless citizens on this Coast. Trusting that these few hints will not pass unheeded by His Britannic Majesty’s Consul Resident, who is the only one capable of saving the Indians and coloured people of this Coast from utter ruin. (US Department of State Records 817.52/16)

This passage is typical of turn-of-the-century appeals that Mosquitians made to the British and the United States in which they emphasized how incorporation into Nicaragua would represent a step backward from more to less civilized (Pineda 1991). Mosquitians continued to condemn the “transition” from English hands to Nicaraguans...
hands as a transition from order and progress to “lawlessness” and ruin. For the inhabitants of Bilwi and other communities in the northern Mosquito Coast, the fact that the Nicaraguan government granted large concessions of land to foreign companies, showing little regard for native land claims, provided a glaring example of this lawlessness.

In June of 1924 the multi-lateral commission formed to arbitrate the dispute recommended that “the Government of Nicaragua grant the request of the Indians of Crukira, Twappy, Bilway and other villages within the jurisdiction of the Wawa River” (US Department of State Records 817.52/35). The US consulate had previously warned Miles and his associates that the land they desired should not conflict with the land claimed by the Indians (US Department of State Records 817.52/17).

Miles, in a letter addressed to the US chargé d’affaires on September 1, 1923, denied any wrongdoing on several grounds. First, he claimed that the Indians of the Wawa district “had made no protest to the denouncement when I made it and which was advertised and posted, and notice thereof was given by the Comandante of the district according to law, nor did they make any protest to the surveyor when he went to make the survey.” Second, he speculated that the Indians already possessed a great deal more land than what the treaty intended them to have. Third, he objected that “there are thousands of hectares to which they already have title that have never been cultivated or used for any purpose.” These arguments, with their defensive and conjectural tone, were secondary in comparison to the irrefutable logic of his final argument in the final paragraph:

I am writing this letter for the purpose of laying before you the true situation. I have built a wharf at Bragman Bluff 1188 ft. long with sixteen ft. of water at low tide and nineteen ft. at high tide, a saw mill with a capacity of forty thousand feet daily, a planing mill operated by electricity, and I am now constructing something like fifty miles of railroad. I have so far spent nearly four hundred thousand dollars and will spend that much more within the next four months. Respectfully, Leroy T. Miles. (US Department of State Records 817.52/17)

It is not surprising to find that the ultimate authority in this dispute was not the US, British, or Nicaraguan governments, and much less the
Ten Communities. Rather, it was the ever-expanding dollar. As Miles’s Bragman’s Bluff Lumber Company continued to grow and transform the landscape of the northern Mosquitia from forgotten backwater to major export zone, the prospect for Nicaraguan recognition of Costeño lands greatly diminished. The lands were converted by the power of the dollar into political fait accompli, reified and effectively alienated in Pacific Coast eyes from the claims of their inhabitants.

The foreign policy of the US government in the Caribbean in the early part of the twentieth century was characterized as “dollar diplomacy,” in which the expansion of US companies into the region was actively defended and propagated by the State Department and the military. This undoubtedly was true for Nicaragua—a country that was occupied by the Marines on a regular basis from 1907 to 1933. Nevertheless, the US government and US companies did not always act as a single actor with a clearly defined project. The mild State Department support of Costeño land claims, claims that conflicted with those of the Bragman’s Bluff Lumber Company, provided an example of this disparity of interest between the US government and US companies. In fact, the State Department in 1928 objected to the terms of the renewed contract between Nicaragua and Bragman’s Bluff Lumber Company on the grounds that the tax exemptions and land concessions were too broad and could lead to unrest. The State Department, however, never followed through on its threat to withdraw its support and protection of the company (US Department of State Records 817.52/4, 5, 6). On the contrary it would in the next decade repeatedly intervene militarily in Puerto Cabezas “to protect American lives and property.”

Undaunted by the land controversy, and the protests and admonitions it generated, Bragman’s Bluff Lumber Company rapidly grew. In 1923 the company, which since 1921 had been exporting lumber, began to harvest and export bananas and built many miles of railroad (US Department of State Records 817.6172/5). It controlled 33,000 hectares of land and would soon control 50,000 more hectares. The employment opportunities in the company also attracted laborers from throughout Nicaragua. The company contracted White skilled laborers from the United States and Italy, while Black skilled and “unskilled” laborers arrived from the United States and the West Indies. West Indians primarily arrived directly or indirectly by way of the canal zone (Karnes
Race-related disturbances immediately arose as Nicaraguans protested the use of foreign labor.

Within a few years of its creation, Bragman’s Bluff Lumber Company became the largest employer and investor in all of Nicaragua. William Heard, the US consul in Bluefields, summarized the extent of the company’s growth in March of 1924:

The developments so far at Bragman Bluff consists of a railway wharf 1200 feet long, the erection of a sawmill capable of sawing 25 M. feet of lumber daily and a planing mill with two planers which when equipped with electric motors will plane 45 M. feet of lumber daily. The company has erected two large hotels, each having 20 rooms, for the use of their employees. They have also built a large two story office building, a commissary, a material store house, residences for a doctor and assistant manager, about ten buildings for laborers as well as other small buildings. A steel water tank with a capacity of 50,000 gallons has recently been completed, and work is now progressing on a well which is to furnish 500 gallons of water per minute. About ten days ago this well had been drilled 300 feet. . . .

In addition to the saw mill above described, there are three portable mills located along the line of the railway and in the heaviest timbered tracts. Each of these mills is capable of sawing 10 M feet daily. It has been estimated that the timber land at present under lease contains 17,000,000 feet of excellent pine. (US Department of State Records 817.6172/6)

Much of this so-called timberland, of course, was used and inhabited by Costeños, who argued that their claim to these lands devolved from their status as Indian villages protected under the Harrison-Altamirano Treaty of 1905. The subsequent US consul in Bluefields, A. J. McConnico, who was less sympathetic to Miskito land claims than his predecessor, supported the lumber company’s position, referring to the Wawa District villagers as “Indian squatters” (US Department of State Records 817.504/22). Thus, the once unconquerable inhabitants of Mosquito, the native kings of the colonial Central American Coast and the scourge of the Spanish Empire, found themselves pitted against an enemy that they could not defeat—an enemy that regarded them as “squatters” on lands that they had for generations occupied.
In light of the explosion of investment and agro-industrial development in the region, the Nicaraguan government chose to reevaluate its policy of legally recognizing Indian community lands. On an ideological level this policy had, since its inception, clashed with the widespread conviction in Nicaragua, and indeed throughout the Americas, that the Indian populations were socially and culturally backward and therefore represented an obstacle to the progress of the modern nation state. Throughout the colonial period in Latin America, the Spanish colonial government recognized (and often actively organized) communal land and labor arrangements as a strategy to harness and control Indian populations. Spanish colonial governments quite consciously provided legal and administrative structures (known in Mexico, for example, as la república de los indios) that fostered the formation of corporate Indian communities that possessed a special, albeit decidedly disadvantageous, relationship with the Spanish authorities.

With the onset of independent republican governments and the growth of an export-oriented national economy based on wage labor and private property, the modernizing liberal elite often came to view these colonial arrangements as obsolete and detrimental to national growth. Latin American governments therefore attempted to dismantle Indian communities in order to release their land and labor into growing national and international markets. In the Pacific region at the turn of the century, Nicaraguan Liberals and the burgeoning coffee-growing elite had finally won the long battle against the Indian communities and their Conservative party patrons to dispossess the last highland Indian groups that still retained communal landholdings (Gould 1993a, 428). Within this context the Nicaraguan government attempted to discredit Indian land claims in the Atlantic Coast because it perceived these as an obstacle both to economic progress and the development of Nicaraguan nationalism.

Spanish Ideologies of Race, Language, Culture, and Progress

In 1925 the national government sent a commission to resolve the land and labor disputes in the region. The chief of the commission, Doctor Frutos Ruiz y Ruiz, arrived in August and heard the complaints of the sindicos of Bilwi, Krukira, and Sisín. Ruiz’s general attitude toward
the Atlantic Coast and its inhabitants, as manifested in his report to the
national government (Ruiz y Ruiz 1927), is particularly instructive in
understanding his ultimate decision in the conflict. His writings lucidly
portray the deeply rooted primitivism manifested by Pacific Nicaraguans
with regard to the Atlantic Coast and its Costeño inhabitants.

In contrast to the Costeños, who regarded their historical connection
with the Anglo-Caribbean as positive and “civilizing,” and took
pride in their ability to remain outside of the sphere of Spanish (and later
Nicaraguan) control, Ruiz considered that the backwardness and
poverty of the region resulted directly from, insofar as history was con-
cerned, the English interference in the colonial project of the Spanish. 13

He wrote nostalgically:

One still regards with distaste the small Costeño villages, where
there is nothing more than signs of death. The english protection
and the moravian propaganda have not left the smallest trace of cul-
ture in the Mosquito Coast. This is why that when one passes the
“Fortress”, the old spanish fort that defended the hispanic-
nicaraguan civilization against piracy which had its hideaway in the
bay of Bluefields, one’s spirit jumps to life and exultant one cries in
admiration of this glorious monument, a legacy from Spain to the
nicaraguan colony. 14 (ibid., 154)

Ruiz regarded the Atlantic Coast as an underpopulated region
where “piracy impeded the development of Spanish culture” (ibid.,
182). 15 The absence of this Spanish culture, according to Ruiz, repre-
sented a threat to Nicaraguan unity and an obstacle to the progress of
the region. Ruiz therefore called for the national government to “attract
settlers to these deserted lands where the spirit of nicaraguan patriot-
ism barely clings to life” (ibid., 181). He explicitly conceived of the
incorporation of the region into national life as a colonial project. He
wrote: “Assuming that we do not want barbarity to triumph, we should
agree that hispanic-nicaraguan civilization should provide an example
and fulfill the legacy of the Spanish Empire, colonizing the Coast, invad-
ing the Coast, populating the Coast with hispanic-nicaraguan blood,
language, customs and culture” (ibid., 115).

For Ruiz, not only did the Atlantic Coast with its English culture
and indigenous languages suffer from the absence of the appropriate
Spanish language and culture, but it also lacked suitable levels of “Hispanic-Nicaraguan” blood. For Ruiz, the importance of such blood resided not only in its capacity to lighten the skin of Costeños, but also in its ability to uplift the level of “civilization” in the region.16

It is interesting to note that while Ruiz decried the presence of English “customs” and “culture,” he did not retroactively extol the contribution of the white English “blood” that presumably accompanied this dispersal of English customs. His appeal to the whitening influence of Hispanic-Nicaraguan blood is particularly interesting in light of the fact that from a purely demographic standpoint the biological impact of the Spaniards in the Pacific Coast was not significantly greater than that of the English in the Atlantic Coast; in other words, the Spanish migration to Pacific Nicaragua was not proportionally much greater than the English migration to the Mosquito Coast.

At the end of the colonial period the racial system of Pacific Nicaragua, although recognizing small white (blanco) and Indian minorities, was dominated by the category of the Mestizo, a White-Indian mixed category. On the other hand, the Atlantic Coast system recognized Indians and Creoles (both explicitly non-white terms) but did not possess a category that was defined as even partially white. Once more, in the absence of Englishmen in the Mosquito Coast (and a declining presence in the English colonies such as Belize and Jamaica), Afro-Caribbean peoples had become the bearers, in the minds of Pacific Nicaraguans and indeed West Indians themselves, of English culture. This created an ideological environment in which Nicaraguan nationalization of the area was favorable because “English culture” traveled with “Black blood” but “Spanish culture” traveled with Mestizo blood, which after all was, by definition, part white.

Ruiz and his superiors in the Nicaraguan government were deeply troubled by two features of Mosquito Coast society: (1) the influx of Black workers from the West Indies and the United States, and (2) the preexisting abundance of Indians. The fact that a US company was transforming Bilwi into a major export zone and a regular stop along Caribbean trade routes made the completion of this civilizing project urgent. Ruiz and Nicaraguans like him viewed the presence of Blacks and Indians on the Atlantic Coast as a blemish on the national racial landscape and an obstacle to national progress, in much the same way
that they viewed the role of the dark-skinned Spanish monoglot campesinos and Mestizos that formed the great majority of the Nicaraguan population in the Pacific. Pacific Nicaragua at the time was, and continues to be, a skin-color-conscious society in which light skin and European features are favored over dark skin and indigenous features. The fact that the Pacific Indians had supposedly abandoned their indigenous languages and customs and allowed themselves to be incorporated into a Hispanic national culture represented a great step forward from the perspective of the Nicaraguan State.\textsuperscript{17}

According to the national project of the Nicaraguan state, progress was to be achieved through the attainment of greater civilization. This civilizing project, however, was conceived of in racial terms: to become more civilized was to become more like the whites, who inherited their civilization from the Spanish. Therefore the incorporation of other races into the polity represented a step backwards. Ruiz wrote:

\begin{quote}
The real Coast, the Mosquitia today is only interesting as an ethnological curiosity; the different races of pure indians should be studied before their impending disappearance. These indians have not made the slightest contribution to civilization, and given that there are so few of them, only a few thousand, they are utterly without value. The few blacks, which seem greater in number because it is an under populated country, do not even provide this curiosity because they don't even have their own language and they are only valued as beasts of burden for foreign companies, which prefer them over the rest of nicaraguans. (Ruiz y Ruiz 1927, v)
\end{quote}

Here Ruiz added the concept of “value” to the equation between blood and level of civilization. Ruiz's distinction between Indians and Blacks with regard to their respective possession of culture revealed a great deal regarding his underlying assumptions about the relationship between race and culture. Namely, Indians have culture, albeit primitive, and Blacks (in the Americas) do not; rather, they are the imperfect bearers of English tradition.

In the colonial period a similar assumption on the part of the Spanish and Nicaraguan governments provided incentive for Zambo residents of the Mosquito Coast, as well as their British patrons, to define themselves as Indians rather than Blacks in order to legitimize their right
to local rule. Ruiz granted that Indians had a culture (an “ethnological curiosity”); however, he refused to bestow the same dubious recognition on Blacks. From Ruiz’s perspective, neither of the two races contributed to the national civilization, but Blacks were considered to have less to offer because they could not claim to have their own culture. This fact made them quintessential outsiders, in contrast to the Nicaraguan Indian insiders—albeit primitive ones. For this reason Blacks did not have a legitimate claim to a share of the Nicaraguan polity. Blacks, who from the perspective of Pacific Nicaraguans were regarded as English-speaking migrant sojourners from the English Caribbean, were considered too English (albeit in a degraded way) and therefore, unlike the Miskito, could not be considered primitive culture-bearing subjects.

In the context of Ruiz’s formulation, consider the fact that although today Pacific Nicaraguans show a great demand for learning English, they do not often regard the Creole English spoken by Costeños as a resource for them in that endeavor. Foreigners such North Americans and British are sought-after English teachers, but in my experience, hiring Costeños as English teachers is not common. English is not viewed as a national resource. In other words, they do not commonly view Creole English as part of the cultural and linguistic patrimony of the Nicaraguan nation. This is because the English spoken by Costeños is considered to be at best only of regional value.

From the perspective of Ruiz and his Nicaraguan contemporaries, Blacks, even more than Indians, threatened the Nicaraguan nationalist project because they were perceived as a potentially limitless source of immigrants rather than a finite population living within national borders, and because they were favored as workers by the foreign companies investing in the Caribbean coast of Central America. The Nicaraguan government favored foreign investment because it promised to make the Coast economically productive, a task at the time unattainable for the Nicaraguan government. Yet the government feared the Caribbeanization of the region that accompanied this economic development.

This Caribbeanization was perceived as an invasion of African-Americans and the English language. The city of Colon in Panama, the Caribbean gateway to the Panama Canal, provided for Ruiz the most horrifying example of this phenomenon. The Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua was in grave danger of becoming another Colon, which he
described as a “museum of races, without patriotism, without tradition, without common ideals, a confusion of languages, of colors, of bloods, of vice.” He wrote: “Nicaraguans should prepare themselves so that the coast doesn’t become a second Panama Canal. There must not be cities like Colon where patriotism is abolished and where reigns only confusion of languages, dissolution of customs and agglomeration of the most degraded races of the world” (Ruiz y Ruiz 1927, 116).

Ruiz here defined intra-Caribbean migration as inherently destructive to the social fabric of the countries in which it took place. For Ruiz the influx of Africans was not just a racial problem, but their presence also foretold a cultural and linguistic problem (and therefore a national problem) of disunity and cultural chaos. From this perspective, the Nicaraguan government found itself in a quandary in which economic growth and development would be won at the sacrifice of what they perceived to be an already-compromised racial and cultural homogeneity. Contrast this formulation to the value placed on cosmopolitanism displayed by Costeños.

Ruiz proposed that the government should oblige Bragman’s Bluff Lumber Company to hire only gentes del interior (literally “people from the interior”) to the exclusion of negros and chinos (Ruiz y Ruiz 1927, iv). In the Pacific region, where presumably Nicaraguan culture was irreversibly ingrained, immigrants could be assimilated to national life. For Ruiz, however, this was not the case in the Atlantic Coast. He wrote: “Nicaragua is a nation in formation without homogeneity of races and for this reason it isn’t prepared to imprint its national seal on populations of such diversity in a region as under populated and un-nicaraguan as the atlantic littoral. Therefore immigrants should be carefully chosen to populate the Coast and un-assimilable races should be repudiated” (ibid., 7).

Lacking power and resources, the Nicaraguan government did not find itself in a position to dictate labor recruitment policies to the US company. It also lacked the resources to assimilate and Hispanicize immigrants, not to mention native Costeños. Education was perceived as a vital strategy in counteracting the divisive effect of unwanted immigration. Ruiz demanded that the Nicaraguan law requiring instruction in the Spanish language be enforced. Given that the US company funded the earliest schools in the city, however, this became difficult to carry out in practice.
In 1925 the Nicaraguan government created an official municipality in Bilwi that was given a Spanish name, Puerto Cabezas. The dominance of the English language in the city disquieted Nicaraguan officials, often stirring up a great deal of nationalistic indignation. The perceived threat of the English language did not simply result from the perception that its dominance indicated foreign domination. This fact alone perhaps could have been stomached by Nicaraguan national leaders, who generally looked to the United States as a possible benefactor in the development and modernization of the country. English, however, was also the language of many Costeños as well as Black West Indian and Black US workers, the latter group being regarded by the Nicaraguan government as the least desirable candidates for citizenship. Ruiz expressed anti-English-language indignation after having visited the company hospital—the only hospital in the city: “The Commission visited the Hospital that the Company has in Puerto Cabezas. The first impression that your humble informant had was disagreeable—the doctor from the Hospital greeted me in english. What a surprise to learn that all the patients only spoke spanish—I wonder if their ailments spoke english? This anomaly must disappear. The doctors should know spanish and every sign in a foreign language should be considered a permanent insult to nicaraguan patriotism” (Ruiz y Ruiz 1927, 56).

English, although it was the language of the dominant country of the Americas, came to represent a national threat in the Atlantic Coast—a threat that was explicitly perceived in racial terms. The numbers of White American workers were low, their stays relatively brief, and their likelihood of settling in the region was also low. US agro-industrial penetration, the increased use of English, and the influx of Black West Indians and North Americans went hand in hand. This created a highly paradoxical and conflictive social and ideological context in which, on the one hand, the industrializing US presence represented a step away from Nicaraguan economic and societal backwardness (*atraso*), while on the other hand this presence inspired fear of cultural decline and racial degeneration.

The above analysis of Pacific Nicaraguan attitudes toward the Coast and its inhabitants helps us to understand the decisions that Ruiz would ultimately make with regard to the complaints of the Miskito communities. The principal complaint that the síndico of Bilwi, who at the time
was Noah Columbus, made to the Ruiz commission was that Bragman’s Bluff Lumber Company had illegally encroached on lands belonging to the Ten Communities. In addition, he complained that the company had erected a fence that separated the company buildings, including barracks and housing for employees, from the community of Bilwi. The company maintained a closed gate on the road between the company section of town and the dwellings of the “native” section of town.

This native section accommodated many small stores, restaurants, and, according to Ruiz, “nineteen cantinas.” Craftsmen who performed periodic work for the company and its employees, such as shoe repairmen, bricklayers, carpenters, and even a doctor, also lived there (Ruiz y Ruiz 1927, 4). Ruiz described the “national” profile of Bilwi in the following manner: “With the development of the Bragman Bluff Company during the last 3 years the village of Bilue has been erected. Its inhabitants have come from a wide variety of places: there are 3 houses owned by English, 4 by Germans, 3 by Chinese, 5 by Jamaicans, 26 by Hispanic-Nicaraguans and 12 by mosquito Indians.” The majority of the 350 total inhabitants are Spanish—the term used in these parts to refer to Nicaraguans from the interior of the Republic” (ibid., 7). Ruiz added that about 1,000 workers lived within the company section. The company forbade inhabitants of Bilwi to erect constructions of any kind within those sections of Bilwi where it foresaw expansion. The police, whose salaries were paid by the company, enforced this policy.

The most serious grievance expressed by Columbus, the síndico of Bilwi, was that the company had illegally leased lands in and around Bilwi from the community of Karatá. Karatá claimed that the pasture lands to which it received title in 1918 included lands claimed and inhabited by the Miskito people of Bilwi. In 1924 the síndico of Karatá leased the entirety of its pasture lands to the US company for the price of six hundred córdobas annually. Bilwi presented a 1917 title granted to the Ten Communities that contradicted Karatá’s claim. Thus two Miskito communities found themselves on opposite sides of a legal conflict regarding Indian land. Unfortunately for Bilwi, the US company had already provided a de facto solution to the conflict.

Residents of Bilwi, Miskito Indians and “Spanish” alike, had previously brought this conflict in land titles to the attention of the British Consul E. Owen Rees in the hope that he would arbitrate the dispute. Rees
recommended to the Ruiz commission that the claim to the portion of Karatá’s land that conflicted with Bilwi’s claim be annulled. He concluded that Karatá’s surveyor had incorrectly measured Karatá’s pasture lands, resulting in an absurd situation in which residents of Bilwi, whose land title predated that of Karatá, should be required to lease land from Karatá within the confines of their own community (Ruiz y Ruiz 1927, 13).

Ruiz rejected Rees’s recommendations. Emboldened by the possibility of taking advantage of the conflict and confusion, he claimed all of the land in and around Bilwi, whose value increased daily, as national land: “Upon considering the arguments of all the parties in the conflict between the Bragman Bluff Company, the indians of Bilué, Caratá, and residents of Bilué it is clear that none is correct—neither those who constructed [houses], nor those who prohibited this construction. Only the state is the legitimate owner of the lands in question” (ibid., 12).

Ruiz asserted that Bilwi land claims could not be protected by the Harrison-Altamirano Treaty because at the time of the signing of this treaty (1905) and at the time of the granting of the Bilwi land title (1917), no Miskito village in fact existed. He further argued that Bilwi was not a Miskito village because the Miskito, as “nomadic” Indians, had not continuously occupied the site. He claimed that as a result of their nomadic nature, all of the Miskito Indians who lived in Puerto Cabezas during his visit, with the exception of Noah Columbus, had arrived within the last three years from other communities. What is particularly revealing about this approach taken by Ruiz was the way in which he discredited Costeño land claims by invoking primitivist conceptions of Indian culture.

According to Ruiz, the Miskito abandoned Bilwi in 1897 and scattered throughout the region, leaving Noah Columbus as the only inhabitant of Bilwi until 1922. For Ruiz, the fact that Bilwi did not contest the Karatá land title in 1918 supported his claim that the village had been essentially uninhabited during that period. In the following quotation, notice the way that Ruiz invoked the idea of primitive Indian culture to discredit Bilwi Indian land claims: “When the Bragman Bluff Company established itself there was nothing in this place, so it can be said that today Bilué indians do not exist. Therefore, to speak of the indians of Bilué, of their secular rights, of the land of their forefathers, of their sepulchers, of their homes, etc. etc. is pure imaginary fiction. They abandoned their lairs and their cemeteries and returned to their nomadic life, living only from hunting and fishing” (Ruiz y Ruiz 1927, 12).
For Ruiz, the land claims of the Bilwi Indians were necessarily linked to the degree to which they conformed to a stereotyped vision of being Indian. In this vision, steeped in exoticism, Indians were held to be part of the natural world rather than the man-made social and civilized world, and hence their claims to the land were of a cultural and spiritual, rather than legal, nature. Their alleged nomadic subsistence practice of hunting and fishing, which for Ruiz stood in contrast to “civilized” agriculture, weakened their claim to legal land ownership. For example, Ruiz explicitly placed the Miskito on par with the animal world by characterizing their past residences as “lairs.” As part of the flora and fauna of the natural world, they had only a transitory connection to their places of residence and therefore should not enjoy any legal rights with regard to these. Once more, the Atlantic Coast land, like its indigenous inhabitants, was portrayed as wild, uncivilized, and without intrinsic value in its undeveloped state.

In this hostile context, in which development was pitted against Indian communal identity, the inhabitants of Bilwi found themselves in a peculiar bind. Not only did they have to assert their Miskito Indian identity in order to protect themselves, and where possible profit, from the encroachment of the US companies and the Nicaraguan government, they also were obliged to prove that they were Bilwi Indians. In the process of asserting land rights as Indians, however, they simultaneously invited the scorn of the Nicaraguan government, which viewed Miskito land claims as a threat to its project of Hispanic-Nicaraguan expansion. Given that the government regarded the Miskito as an uncivilized people, their attempt to achieve recognition of their land through civilized channels represented for the Nicaraguan government a contradiction that Ruiz resolved by questioning the motives of the litigants for claiming the land. Take, for example, the following quotation: “Only after a large agro-industrial Enterprise was created, and a new port was opened, and big business appeared in the old Bilwi could greed possibly have any reason to exist in such a inhospitable region. . . . In reality these lands did not have the slightest worth before the creation of Puerto Cabezas and for this reason the mosquito indians, neither those from Karatá nor those from the aforementioned communities, never bothered to claim them” (Ruiz y Ruiz 1927, 16).

This statement reveals the deeply ingrained exoticism with which the Miskito and the Mosquito Coast were perceived. The Nicaraguan
government could consider the Miskito Indians capable of the very
Euro-American emotion of greed only after these Indians were con-
fronted by modern Western agro-industry. The land itself, in its wild
state, could not possibly be the object of civilized avarice.

While in Puerto Cabezas, Ruiz discovered that many non-Indian
residents of Bilwi agreed with and even advocated the positive resolution
of many Miskito complaints and demands. He expressed great conster-
nation and disbelief upon finding that a Spanish Nicaraguan or any non-
Indian would ally himself with what he considered to be a retrograde and
savage cause. To his dismay, however, the Indian cause appealed to people
whom he considered non-Indians. Many Costeño inhabitants of Bilwi
resented the exclusionary policies and extremely broad quasi-govern-
mental powers of Bragman's Bluff Lumber Company. A successful reso-
lution of the Miskito Indian dispute could have strengthened their
position vis-à-vis the Nicaraguan government and the company.

Shop owners and tradesmen, who strongly opposed the company
policy of paying wages in company script redeemable at the company
commissary, stood to benefit most from a weakening of the com-
pany's powers. This sector, among others, was sympathetic to the Miskito
cause. Ruiz lambasted this position as self-interested duplicity:

One often hears talk of the abuses committed by foreign Companies
against the mosquito indians and the newspapers turn around
and spew this to the four winds. This in turn establishes an
incontrovertible public image of an infinite number of martyred sons
of the fatherland. However if one objectively examines the situation
one will find that the entire situation can be reduced to the clamor
of a tobacco trader or merchant whose least concern is the rights of
the mosquito indians, with whom he does not share blood nor lan-
guage. These men view everything through a bottle of liquor or a
colombian cloth. (Ruiz y Ruiz 1927, 21)

Ruiz refused to accept the possibility that Costeños of all kinds
(Indian and non-Indian alike) could, in certain circumstances, perceive
and act upon a shared interest vis-à-vis the Nicaraguan government
and the US company. This supra-ethnic regional unity was, for Ruiz and
others, counterintuitive in light of the co-presence of disparate races,
languages, and bloods that he and others believed engendered a muddled and volatile racial and linguistic context.

**Labor Policies and Racial Conflict**

Notwithstanding the potential for inter-group solidarity, the labor policies of the US companies created structural contradictions between different sectors of the society that to varying degrees frustrated the formation and exercise of Costeño solidarity. Nicaraguan laborers from the Pacific and the Atlantic found themselves excluded from higher-paying skilled and semiskilled jobs that the company filled with Black laborers from the West Indies and the United States. These workers, particularly the West Indians, who in many cases arrived primarily via the Canal Zone, had already mastered specialized lumber and banana industry tasks. Because the company brought them from outside the country, they often provided them housing in the form of barracks and bungalows. Nicaraguan nationals, who had to make their own transportation and housing arrangements, resented this policy (Ruiz y Ruiz 1927, 61). The flip side to this policy was that when their services were no longer wanted, the company shipped West Indian and US workers to other parts of the Caribbean. Company officials also favored English-speaking Costeños over monoglot Spanish-speaking or monoglot Miskitu-speaking Costeños for low-level administrative work. White North Americans occupied all the highest-paying administrative and technical jobs.

Those native Nicaraguans with little or no fluency in English, primarily campesinos from the interior but also some Costeños, experienced this preference for English-speaking workers in racial terms. That is to say, Pacific Nicaraguans perceived their low status in the workplace as being the result of the influx of Black workers from the Caribbean and the United States. Given the nature of this situation, it is not surprising to find that the first labor disturbances in Puerto Cabezas centered on racial differences among workers, rather than national or class differences between workers and management. This tension speaks to the importance of structural features of the local political economy in shaping race relations.

On August 30, 1925, resentment between Nicaraguan and foreign workers manifested itself in the form of riots and personal violence committed against West Indian and US Blacks. In the words of the
commander of the USS Tulsa, which later arrived at the request of company officials, “trouble broke out between the native laborers and foreign negro workmen, composed of Americans and Jamaican negroes” (US Department of State Records 817.504/24). Nicaraguan employees of Bragman’s Bluff Lumber Company threatened to kill Black workers. Three US Blacks and two Jamaicans were injured. Thirty-seven Nicaraguans were arrested and, according to H. D. Scott, company manager, forty to fifty “British colored subjects” left the city on account of the riots (US Department of State Records 817.504/23). Scott explained:

For some time the native laborers here have been complaining about the introduction of negro laborers, and we have refrained from introducing any of these when the work could be done by people of the country. However it has been impossible to get people here who understand the business of making turpentine, also there are none who know how to make crossties. We have introduced some nineteen negroes for the turpentine business, and on the SS Algeria which arrived here on August 27th we introduced fourteen American negroes to make crossties. On the night these negroes arrived here there was a demonstration made against them by the local people, and this kept up and came to a head Sunday the 30th of August, at about 12 o’clock. (ibid.)

Nicaraguan discontentment toward company labor policies manifested itself in the form of acts of violence against individual Black laborers rather than in the form of protest directed to the North American leadership of the company. Whereas Nicaraguan workers did not find unbearable their subordination to white North American managers, their subordination to Black foreigners represented an intolerable inversion of a Pacific Nicaraguan ideological hierarchy of racial value, in which Blacks occupied the lowest position.

Two weeks prior to the disturbances mentioned above, the local labor union El Avance, anticipating the arrival of the Ruiz commission, addressed a letter to the Nicaraguan government in which it detailed the grievances of national workers against the US company. First on the list was a complaint that the company was trying to “colonize” the town of Bilwi. In response to this perceived colonization, workers felt obligated to “defend our race” (defender nuestra raza) against encroachment and to
demand the protection of the Nicaraguan government as Nicaraguan citizens (Ruiz y Ruiz 1927, 60). The letter stated:

We ask the Government to absolutely prohibit the entrance of blacks into the country because they cause the degeneration of our race and above all represent a detriment to our fellow workers. The Company in question is trying to colonize our town and undoubtedly is trying to do what it did in “la Ceiba” Honduras—introduce no less than 14,000 blacks. We think the amount that we have now in the country is sufficient. The government should in the name of justice imitate other governments which have repudiated that race in favor of the national race. (Ruiz y Ruiz 1927, 60)

Although the Spanish term “raza” is not necessarily equivalent to “race” as it is defined in the US context, here the Nicaraguan laborers clearly expressed their objection to the imported workers in racial terms. It is important to note that these workers, whose chief complaint was essentially the unfair preference for foreign workers in the labor market, did not protest the introduction of foreign white company employees, who enjoyed far greater advantages than foreign Blacks. At this conjuncture in the history of Puerto Cabezas, political economy and anti-Black racism fed off one another.

The position of Nicaraguan workers cannot be explained simply by the fact they were less likely to regard foreign white workers as competitors in the workplace. Undoubtedly, many Nicaraguans internalized an international labor hierarchy that assessed the value of North American labor as far greater than that of Nicaraguan labor. That is to say, many Nicaraguans did not consider themselves qualified for the kinds of jobs (management, engineering, clerical, etc.) that were occupied primarily by foreign Whites and therefore did not regard their exclusion from these positions as illegitimate. These same workers, however, deeply resented their exclusion from the sorts of tasks that Blacks were brought in to perform. The belief of Nicaraguan workers in their ability to perform the jobs performed by Blacks does not represent the only factor that helps to explain the resentment and violence by nationals against foreign Blacks. An ideological factor, a deeply ingrained hierarchy of relative human worth which valued light skin over dark skin, played a significant role in: (1) legitimizing Nicaraguan subordination to
light-skinned North Americans, and (2) provoking discord between native Nicaraguans and imported Black laborers.

Although the main thrust of Nicaraguan opposition to the company was channeled into protest against the introduction of Black West Indians and North Americans, Nicaraguan workers also expressed other kinds of grievances. For example, they complained of high rents in the company-owned barracks and houses. They also objected to the high prices at the company commissary, which held workers as a captive market in Bilwi due to the practice of paying workers in company script and coupons. Workers bitterly joked that the money they earned only left the company office long enough “to take in some sun” (coger sol) before it returned to the company’s coffers. Also nationalistic appeals were made against the ten-hour workday exacted by the company: “This Company has adopted a 10 hour work day. Let’s not follow the lead of the civilized nations, rather let’s follow the national customs—in all parts of this country the work day is nine hours” (Ruiz y Ruiz 1927, 61). This appeal conceded the exclusion of Nicaragua from consideration as a “civilized nation,” yet it simultaneously opposed the unreasonably long workday, imposed by the civilized US company, on nationalistic grounds.

Similar ambivalence with regard to the legitimacy of North American dominance, both cultural and economic, manifested itself among all classes of Nicaraguans. For example, Commissioner Ruiz, although a supporter of the US companies and foreign investment in general, opposed certain company practices that he regarded as disrespectful of Nicaraguan patriotism. In addition to his aforementioned opposition to the dominance of the English language over Spanish in the city, Ruiz also condemned the fenced separation between the company-owned and operated section of the town and the so-called native section of Bilwi. He wrote: “It should not be allowed that the village that gives homes to the workers of Puerto Cabezas, in numbers large enough to give it the appearance of a city, be separated from the population by any kind of fence. This dividing line is extremely humiliating, not only for the inconvenience it creates but more importantly for the significance that it carries. An honorable nation should not permit such divisions” (Ruiz y Ruiz 1927, 25). From Ruiz’s perspective, the fenced division between US company and Nicaraguan town sections represented an unlicensed overstepping of foreign authority on Nicaraguan soil. The
fence communicated a message that violated even his pro-US sensibilities. Ruiz objected not to the fact that the company should take extraordinary measures (beyond those taken by the Nicaraguan government) to protect its people and property. Rather, the company’s effrontery in regarding this property and people as its own, in defiance of Nicaraguan authority and sovereignty, offended his sense of patriotism.

In general, Nicaraguans, particularly Costeños, welcomed the economic opportunities brought by US companies and accepted their subordination to the white North American bosses. Widespread racial ideologies that associated light skin with intelligence, industry, and leadership reinforced the acceptance of this subordination. Nicaraguans also no doubt recognized their subordinate position in a hemispheric order in which the United States exercised unchecked military and economic control. In opposition to these factors that served to naturalize and justify subordination, Nicaraguans simultaneously possessed and developed other ideologies that permitted dissent and opposed capitulation to North American supremacy.

The Nicaraguan civil war and the concurrent US Marine occupation (which lasted from 1926 to 1933) superseded this type of protest against company practices. The Atlantic Coast, and particularly the burgeoning new city of Puerto Cabezas, assumed the national spotlight on many occasions during this period. Both the US Marines and Pacific Nicaraguan revolutionaries used the Atlantic Coast and Puerto Cabezas as a staging ground from which to launch military expeditions. This political instability supplanted incipient social unrest within Puerto Cabezas. During this period, Puerto Cabezas witnessed by far the greatest expression of Nicaraguan opposition to North American military and economic occupation. This came in the form of a Pacific-born Liberal army officer, Augusto Cesar Sandino, who led a peasant army into an against-the-odds civil war against the National Guard and US Marines.

Sandino and the Mosquito Coast:
Race War and Revolutionary Indigenism

The war fought by the US Marines against the peasant army of Augusto Sandino from 1927 to 1933 represented the most extreme example of Nicaraguan resistance to United States military and
economic domination. Sandino explicitly conceived of this war as a racial battle between Anglo-Saxon and what he called “Indo-Hispanic” cultures and peoples. He implored Nicaraguans to value national indigenous symbols that were not derived from Europe or the United States. He contributed to, and was a product of, a larger movement in Latin America that sought to define a Latin American character that was independent of Europe and Spain, going beyond the Creole nationalism of the nineteenth century. For Sandino, the Mosquito Coast region of Nicaragua suffered most acutely from the evils of US imperialism. This region, in which Sandino would conduct many of his operations and in which he would settle after the war, accommodated the largest US cultural, economic, and military presence.

Sandino and others also recognized that the Atlantic Coast contained the densest indigenous population and was the least populated and poorest region of the country. Sandino saw great economic potential in the rich and seemingly underutilized expanses of land of the Atlantic Coast. He also saw great symbolic potential for construction a home-grown version of Nicaraguan nationalism using the symbols of indigenous persistence that Costeños manifested. Furthermore, he believed that the intense exploitation and proletarianization of Costeños at the hands of foreign industries contributed to their potential as anticapitalist revolutionaries. In this section, I explore Sandino’s prominent role in the history of the Mosquito Coast and Puerto Cabezas. Despite his glorification of native Nicaraguan peoples and cultures that stood in contrast to Ruiz’s glorification of all things Spanish, ultimately Sandino shared many of the prejudices of his contemporaries with regard to the Atlantic Coast.

The main theater of operations for Sandino’s armies was the Segovian Mountains and the northern Atlantic Coast, as well as adjacent districts along the Honduran border. These regions were the least populated and most impoverished (by conventional standards) regions of the country. Not coincidentally, they both were the areas with the highest level of export-oriented production, all of which was controlled by the United States. Sandino looted mines in both regions in order to raise money for his army, which was now being actively pursued by the Marines (Macaulay 1967, 73). In only the first year of military occupation, the Marine force in Nicaragua numbered over 5,000 and the US military spent over $3.5 million (Dozier 1985, 207). During 1927 and
1928, Sandinista and US troops met in several violent confrontations that caused significant casualties on both sides. The Marines were aided by the bombing and strafing runs of US warplanes. As Sandino’s guerrilla tactics continued to have limited success, the undeclared war became increasingly unpopular in the United States.

In the presidential elections of 1928, a much-reduced Nicaraguan electorate elected Jose María Moncada, the Minister of War under whom Sandino served in the Constitutionalist War. When the Marines refused to fulfill their promise to withdraw from Nicaragua, Sandino resolved to continue the war against the United States, despite the fact that a Liberal was now in power. At this time the Marines started to form the infamous National Guard, which was supposedly intended to be a neutral force composed of Liberals and Conservatives. This National Guard and the family of dictators it propped up would not be overthrown until the 1979 Sandinista Revolution. Sandino and his armies, whose chief demand was the withdrawal of all US troops, continued to fight until 1933, when the Marines withdrew without having defeated the Sandinista troops.

Sandino explicitly conceived of his battle against the US Marines as a race war between what he called the Indo-Hispanic race and the Anglo-Saxon race. He repeatedly referred to the invading troops as “blond beasts,” “blond beasts of the North,” “blond pirates,” and a “Nordic punitive army” (S. Ramirez 1988, 159; Conrad 1990, 140, 203–205). Sandino was an ardent advocate of Latin American unification, a unification that would be based on the links of a common “cosmic” Mestizo race. He wrote: “The spiritual vibration of the Indo-Hispanic race now depends on the Autonomist Army of Central America to save our racial dignity by throwing out of our territory, militarily, politically and economically, the withering Wall Street bankers” (S. Ramirez 1988, 536).

Sandino attempted to invert the self-deprecating Latin American attitude that accepted the notion that the sources of true high culture and civilization came from the United States and Europe. He characterized the United States as a land of barbarians who, despite all their claims to civilization and democracy, actually were reprehensible land-grabbing pirates with an imperialist fixation.

Sandino interpreted the US penetration into Nicaraguan territory through a gendered metaphor of rape and sexual penetration. Sandino
often referred to the Yankees as “machos” or “macho bandits” (Conrad 1990, 68, 92, 146). “Macho” is a Spanish term used to refer to the male of an animal species, but in a Mexican context, with which Sandino was familiar, macho can refer to “any agent or implement that overpowers or invades another” (Hodges 1986, 114). The theme of rape in Sandino’s writing, of course, was not always simply metaphorical. He frequently condemned the rape of Nicaraguan women by US troops: “With their brutal acts the Yankees sow terror among the peaceful inhabitants. In their punitive expedition [in Ocotal, July 1927] they violated 16 women, nine virgins among them, two of these unfortunate girls dying as a result of the brutal outrage of the northern barbarians” (Conrad 1990, 89; also see S. Ramirez 1988, 203).

However, beyond the cases of actual rape, the image of the blond Yankee invader raping the pure and defenseless Nicaraguan woman represented a trope through which Sandino understood Nicaragua’s relationship with the United States. The following anecdote, written by Sandino in Mexico in 1929, two years after the events described, is very enlightening in this regard:

Those regions [the Segovian Mountains] where our column operated are very rich places, and our forces enjoyed an unusual sympathy, because all the inhabitants are revolutionaries and make common cause with us. There is one of those villages that is a true garden of humanity. The women there are uncommonly beautiful and generous. Our cavalry was made up of young men, furthermore for the most part romantic, and so that village was visited constantly by the several units that made up our column.

Colonel Bosque, who distinguished himself as a brave man and as one of our cavalry’s boldest horsemen, won the heart of one of our beautiful young Segovian girls. The girl was of the peasant class, but pretty and educated. The wedding was to take place at the end of the war.

Our struggle constantly grew in intensity. . . . We left those regions to move on to others farther away. . . . The Yankee invaders of our territory and their allies, the Conservative sell-outs and the cowardly Moncadista Liberals attacked us furiously. That awful pressure from the enemies of the national sovereignty of Nicaragua
forced me to take refuge in the Segovian jungles, where we have upheld our country's honor and perhaps that of our race with strength and inflexibility. . . .

For more than a year I did not know the names of the unfortunate young girls who were violated by murderous Yankee invaders during their movements through those inoffensive and undefended towns, and so the impression I felt was a terrible one . . . when I came to know that that virgin bride of the late Colonel Bosque of my cavalry had been cruelly violated by miserable Yankee invaders and as a result of that savage and humiliating act the young girl was wasting away, pale, shocked, and the mother of a son with blue eyes and a ruddy skin, and nobody even knew who the father might be . . .

How terrible! Do my readers not see that that child is the fruit of indifference of the governments of our Latin America, before the sorrow of my beloved and many times blessed Nicaragua? (Conrad 1990, 279–281)

This passage is revelatory in a variety of ways. Here, as well as in other writings, Sandino, who was not from the mountainous Segovian regions and much less the Atlantic Coast, associated these isolated rural areas with an idealized male vision of purity and virginity. He portrayed the women of these regions, like the land that they inhabited, as being untouched and unspoiled. He boasted that many “Yankee pirates are buried in our virgin mountains” (ibid., 238, 386). For Sandino, the women of the Segovian Mountains, and the Atlantic Coast by extension, manifested a closeness to nature that, within his modified “indigenista” ideological framework, meant that they contained particular symbolic value as the vessel of authentic Nicaraguan blood—the essential “Indo” half of the Indo-Hispanic dyad. Through their isolation they personified an authentic Nicaraguan culture and race that Sandino was trying so hard to glorify in opposition to the “blond beasts.”

Patriarchy and ideologies of femininity and masculinity played an integral role within this formulation. The Sandinista soldier represented the strong-willed and virulent man whose duty it was to protect the honor of the vulnerable women, thereby preserving his own honor. Only the Sandinistas could still claim to possess honor in Nicaragua.
because they refused to stand by and watch as the invaders raped their women. These were the women who should rightfully bear them the next generation of Indo-Hispanos. Indeed, Sandino disparaged Nicaraguan apologists of US occupation as “eunuchs.” This metaphor perfectly suited Sandino’s understanding of the Nicaraguan reality: the castrated Nicaraguan man sat in compliance as the invaders sexually exploited the women of the fatherland.

Sandino conceived of his war against the marines as a desperate attempt to prevent the emasculation of the Nicaraguan man by the North American man. They were locked in a struggle in which only the victor could retain his masculinity. Within a conceptual framework that associated femininity with submission and accommodation, the loser would therefore be relegated to the status of a woman. Sandino wrote:

There is nothing that justifies their [the United States] meddling in our internal politics, nor do I believe that the greatness of the “colossus” is sufficient cause to employ that greatness to murder Nicaraguans. Because even if this should be their intention, it would in no way benefit them, because even if they annihilate us, they would find in our bloody remains only the treasure that envelops the hearts of Nicaraguan patriots. This would serve only to humiliate the “hen” [“gallina”] that is displayed on their coat of arms in the form of an eagle. (S. Ramirez 1988, 68)

Here Sandino attempted to invert the symbolism of domination by denying the masculinity of the American symbol, the eagle. Instead he equated it with a female chicken (gallina). Sandino sought to impose his own vision of the rightful pecking order in Nicaragua on the North American “macho” that arrogantly paraded about with impunity in what it presumed to be its’ own “backyard.”

Sandino’s patriarchal thinking, however, differed from other forms of elite Latin American patriarchal thought in that the idealized and exotified vision of the national woman was not a white woman, nor was she wealthy. Rather, she was embodied by the image of a dark-skinned peasant woman. This synecdochical relationship between woman and country emerges clearly in the following passage: “Our young country, this dark beauty of the tropics [esa morena tropical], should wear on her
head the Phrygian cap of liberty bearing the magnificent slogan symbolized by our red and black flag. She should not be a victim raped [violada] by the Yankee adventurers who were invited here by the four horrid individuals who still claim to have been born in this land” (S. Ramirez 1988, 76).

In a country in which to this day light skin, and the European ancestry which it signals, is generally considered more attractive than dark skin (in both men and women), Sandino’s valorization of the dark-skinned women and the Indian past represented a shift away from the dominant ideologies of racial worth and beauty. Despite his appeals to the worthiness of the Mestizo and the Indo-Hispanic race, Sandino manifested many contradictory attitudes and stances with regard to both halves of the Indo-Hispanic formulation.

Sandino regarded the Nicaraguan Indian as the most exploited and most vulnerable segment of society. As victims they deserved the help of some future Nicaraguan state to bring them out of their miserable situation. Sandino remembered the visit of a poor campesino adolescent to his camp: “Like so many children of our America, this child of pure Indian race, in whose eyes glowed the indomitable pride of our ancestors, was wearing something that looked like an undershirt . . . along with underpants, also in a tattered condition, hanging from his waist. Everything about the boy cried out in protest against the present civilization” (S. Ramirez 1988, 208).

For Sandino there was nothing particularly admirable or inspirational about the contemporary “Indian race.” In their present pitiable condition they were to be uplifted and brought into the ranks of civilization. Although Sandino praised the Indian societies of the past as well as their subsequent contribution of “blood” in the formation of the Indo-Hispanic race, he regarded their present state as lamentable. In his writings he did not question the commonly held assumption that Indians were ignorant and therefore represented an obstacle to national progress. His attitude towards the “Indian problem” was similar in many respects to the patriarchal and condescending attitude he held towards women. The Indian must be protected because he represented what was distinctive about Nicaragua and Latin America, but these Indians lacked value in their own right and lacked the ability to protect their own interests. This represented basically a slight reworking of the “white man’s burden” thesis. Sandino suggested that “what our Indians need is
instruction and culture so that they can know themselves, respect themselves and love themselves” (S. Ramirez 1988, 485).

As a result of the war, Sandino came into intimate contact with the inhabitants of the Atlantic Coast, many of whom actively identified themselves as Indian. Whereas in the Pacific region of the 1920s, the last of the corporately organized Indian communities were being abolished and Pacific Nicaraguans rarely positively self-identified as Indians, in the Atlantic Coast, Costeño communities often consciously adopted the Indian or Creole label. Sandino incorporated Costeños into his troops, some of them rising to the highest ranks of his army. He boasted in a “Manifesto” addressed to “The Oppressed Men of our Atlantic Littoral”: “Our Army, which is composed of blacks, Indians, whites etc. etc. without racial nor class prejudice has determined to implant the principles of human fraternity in Nicaragua. And to do this it asks the Nicaraguan People for its unequivocal moral and material support of the Supreme Leadership [of the Sandinista Army]” (US Department of State Records, June 20, 1931. Consular Records from Puerto Cabezas).

Despite his willingness to court Costeño leaders, Sandino was generally unpopular among Costeños. Many of them resented his attacks against the US-owned mines and fruit companies (Brooks 1998). These companies represented their only source of wages and US and British products for which they had acquired a centuries-old taste. Costeños, who had been recently evangelized by the Moravian Church, also resented the killing of a German-North American priest by Sandinista forces, as well as their brutal executions of company workers (see Brooks 1998, Winderich 1989, 67–85, and A. Adams 1995 for an ample discussion of this case). During my fieldwork in Puerto Cabezas, I spoke to a number of Costeños who were Sandino’s contemporaries and who claim that Sandino was known in the Atlantic Coast as a “bandit” in the 1930s. In the present, Costeños generally continue to refer to Sandino as a bandit.

Although Sandino dreamed of improving the Atlantic Coast and integrating it into the national life, his plans betrayed an essentially colonialist mentality. Sandino viewed the extensive forests and savannas of the region as empty lands ("tierras baldías") that were ripe for settlement and development by the “New Nicaraguan Man” (Belausteguiogitia 1981 [1934], 183). Referring to the inhabitants of the Atlantic Coast,
Sandino stated: “They have been completely abandoned. There are about 100,000 of them without communication, without schools, without any kind of government. This is where I want to colonize—in order to raise them up and make them real men” (S. Ramirez 1988, 193). Sandino regarded the Atlantic Coast as the most fertile and potentially productive region of the country. If exploited correctly, the region could end Nicaraguan dependence on imported goods. As the war against the Marines began to wind down, Sandino focused all his energies on creating a utopian cooperative society on the Atlantic coast.

After the elections of 1932 the Marines finally retired from Nicaragua, leaving their nemesis alive and well. With the United States gone, Sandino, still distrusting the Liberals and especially the National Guard, began the difficult process of demilitarization. He proposed the creation of an enormous new district that would be named “Light and Truth.” The new district, located in the Segovian Mountains and the Atlantic Coast, would be governed by Sandino’s army. Under his direction this army would establish agricultural cooperatives: “I will take advantage of this time to organize agricultural cooperatives in these beautiful regions which for centuries have remained abandoned by men of Government . . . the abandoned lands . . . represent 36,000 square kilometers . . . people from the Central American proletariat and from any other part of the world should come to the region” (Wünderich 1989, 147). He added:

We are going to go chop down the forests and make agricultural cooperatives where we all will be brothers. Those campesinos are great workers. We are going to make schools and construct cities. We will bring carpenters, mechanics, belt-makers, tailors etc. so that we will have everything. Everything will be in cooperatives. There is gold in abundance and with it we will buy whatever we need from other countries. . . . The wood here is magnificent for making houses and furniture. Now the campesinos don’t have anything, but they soon will have everything . . . I already have a deal with a Mexican company for the cultivation of banana in the Atlantic Coast and we will throw out United Fruit. We are also going to throw the Yankee companies out of the mines. We should keep fighting, this time peacefully, so that we can have a fatherland that is just for us Nicaraguans. (ibid., 148)
Sandino even proposed that this district could one day become the “Federal District” of a united Central America. It was fitting that Sandino should propose the most sparsely populated region in all of Central America as the site of the future Central American capital city. For Sandino the Atlantic Coast represented a fresh start, a geographic tabula rasa, in which the Indo-Hispanic race could fulfill its cosmic destiny. It represented an unspoiled virgin who was waiting to be impregnated by the “New Nicaraguan Man.”

Which half of the Indo-Hispanic man would carry out this task? Clearly the Miskito, whose lands were offered to the Central American proletariat, were not intended to colonize the region. Although to Sandino’s credit it should be mentioned he stated that after being educated “the sumus, mosquitos and zambos would have the opportunity to be managers and bankers of their cooperatives” (Wünderich 1989, 153). Rather, it was the Mestizo descendants of the Spanish colonizers, for whom Sandino did not hide his admiration, who would have to colonize the savage Atlantic Coast as their Spanish predecessors had colonized an untamed America. The “Manifesto to the Men of the Department of León,” written by Sandino in 1931 before the US withdrawal from Nicaragua, sheds some light on the above question:

Do you know, people of Leon, what your name symbolizes? . . . The symbol of Spain is the lion, spiritual leader of the entire globe, the reason no other nation on earth before or after can imitate Spain’s great deed, which is that of discovering the continent where we live, the promised land for all free men on earth. . . . The people, symbol of the spirit of the Nicaraguan people, are also being infected with servility and a spirit of betrayal toward the fatherland. For this reason, with more than adequate justification, the spirit of the Nicaraguan people has withdrawn from your department to the virgin Segovian forests, where all of you, men of the department of Leon, may be found, so that all good sons of Nicaragua, always standing together, may continue carrying our flag from peak to peak, the untarnished symbol of Nicaraguan Leon, of which you, the men of Leon, are the true guardians, before you old Spanish Leon, the spiritual symbol of this earth in the presence of the Father Creator of the Universe. (Conrad 1990, 386)
Sandino harbored deep sympathies for the “civilizing project” of colonial Spain. In a comment strikingly reminiscent of those of his enemy and countrymen Frutos Ruiz y Ruiz, Sandino recognized that Spain had given Latin America three unifying elements: “its language, its civilization and its blood” (Belausteguigotia 1981 [1934], 200). The Indian, like the continents he inhabited, contributed little more than a wild and exotic vessel in which Spanish blood and culture was to be poured. In this sense, Sandino, despite his revolutionary “Indigenismo” cultivated during his stay in Mexico, did not transcend the deeply-rooted ideological presuppositions of his time and place. On the one hand Sandino associated Spanish blood and language with the concept of civilization, and on the other hand he looked down on the peoples of the Atlantic Coast on the basis of their perceived exoticism and closeness to the natural world.

In 1933 Sandino was assassinated at the orders of Anastasio Somoza, the leader of the Nicaraguan National Guard that had been formed by the US Marines. Somoza’s family and the National Guard, enjoying the unwavering complicity of the United States, dictatorially ruled Nicaraguan until 1979, when, to complete the full circle, the Somoza regime was toppled by Sandinista rebels. After his assassination in 1933, Sandino’s dreams of anarcho-socialist paradise on the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua died out along with the agricultural cooperative he had founded in Wiwilí. The day after his assassination, the National Guard, under the orders of Anastasio Somoza, surrounded this community of unarmed ex-Sandinista soldiers and proceeded to carry out an indiscriminate massacre in which as many as three hundred men and women lost their lives (Keller 1986, 66).

In sum, Sandino’s attitudes and behaviors towards the Mosquito Coast reflected profound ambivalence and contradiction. With regard to his behavior, Sandino incorporated Costeños to an unprecedented degree into the leadership, as well as the rank and file, of his militias. He also included the Mosquito Coast territory as a central part of his political and economic plans and dreams for the future. These plans stood in stark contrast to those of the Nicaraguan governments of his time, which neglected the Mosquito Coast and used it as a fiscal windfall. These governments took taxes from the US extractive companies in the region and spent them disproportionately on governmental expenses in the Pacific
region. In the cycle of coup d’état in Nicaraguan politics at the time, the Atlantic Coast (particularly Bluefields and Puerto Cabezas) was used as a temporary military safe haven and staging ground for assaults on the Pacific Coast. Few resources were allocated to equitably incorporating the region into national plans. Despite these contrasts, however, Sandino shared with his Pacific contemporaries an essentially colonialist approach to the region in which the preexisting interests of the inhabitants of the region (e.g., land claims as well as the willingness of Costeños to work as wage laborers for US extractive industries) were disregarded.

On a more symbolic level, Sandino’s indigenist (or Indo–Hispanicist) valorization of Nicaraguan national imagery predisposed him to value the Mosquito Coast as a reservoir of cultural ammunition. This cultural ammunition could be employed in the symbolic war against what he and others of his political conviction regarded to be a debilitating Eurocentrism that plagued Latin America. This was the same Eurocentric malady that José Martí, Cuban poet and intellectual father of the nationalist Latin American left, eloquently identified at the turn of the century. While the Mosquito Coast represented the extant “Indo” half of the Indo–Hispanic formulation for Sandino, it also represented in a gendered and racialized fashion an unrefined, uncultivated, and uncivilized natural world, a perspective that invited a paternalistic and essentially colonialist approach to the region. After Sandino’s assassination in 1933, the US companies in the region, which had been terrorized by Sandino’s forces and which for this and other reasons had ceased large-scale lumber operations in 1931, enjoyed a period of uninterrupted domestic tranquility that would last until 1979. This period had a profound impact on the development of ideologies of race and culture in the region.

**Summary and Conclusion**

The intensification of tensions brought about by the expanding role of US agro-industry, the US Marines, and the Nicaraguan government in the new port city of Puerto Cabezas took place in a cultural backdrop of deeply rooted Pacific/Atlantic and Spanish/English divisions. These divisions influenced the way in which capitalist penetration was received by the diverse actors who found themselves in the maelstrom that was Puerto Cabezas in the 1920s and 1930s. Costeño and Spanish ideologies
regarding race, culture, modernity, progress, and the relationship between these factors played an important role in the upheaval of this period in Puerto Cabezas.

Costeño inhabitants of Puerto Cabezas invoked their Indian race and the rights that they argued went along with their status as Miskito Indians under the 1905 Harrison-Altamirano treaty in their efforts to resist the alienation of their lands at the hands of Bragman’s Bluff Lumber Company and the Nicaraguan state. However, as their lands and labor increased in value on an international market, they found themselves increasingly unable to maintain authority over them. Once more, their strategies of resistance conflicted with the modernizing project of the Nicaraguan state that regarded the Indian, as well as the Afro-Caribbean worker, as an obstacle to national progress. Black West Indians found themselves in a hostile situation in which for ideological and structural reasons (i.e., their superior place in the job market) they were victimized both by the Nicaraguan government as well as Nicaraguan workers. This discrimination is one factor that helps explain the adoption by West Indians of the Creole, as well as the Miskito, racial label in subsequent generations.

Racial ideologies, phrased in the language of blood and civilization, played a major role in the politics of Puerto Cabezas in the 1920s and 1930s. Frutos Ruiz y Ruiz and Augusto Sandino engaged in a distinctively Spanish exoticization of the Atlantic Coast that invited a paternalistic and discriminatory approach to the conflicts in the region. Pacific Nicaraguans today continue to conflate the region’s geography (perceived as forested and impenetrable) with its people, who are regarded as wild, savage and unrefined. These associations stand in direct opposition to Costeño self-perception as cosmopolitan and worldly. Understanding the specific nature of this exocitization is essential in understanding the ideological underpinnings of the historic and modern conflict in the region.