Chapter 5

Neighborhoods and Official Ethnicity

When I first started fieldwork in Puerto Cabezas, I had hoped to focus my attention on the regional councils of the new autonomous regions and the ways in which race and culture were invoked within them. However, to my dismay I discovered that this forum was, for my purposes, remarkably ethnographically sterile as well as logistically frustrating. With regard to the logistical frustrations, I discovered that the national government, led by the UNO party, neglected to fund the regional councils. It also neglected to invest the regional councils with anything but the most limited governmental authority. For this reason the councils rarely met. When they did meet, the sessions were mired in protocol and factional posturing that I found to be anthropologically uninteresting.

After a great many frustrating interviews in which I found next to impossible to get more than the standard factional “party line,” I decided to stop interviewing Costeño politicians. For this and other reason, I started to focus my attention on the behaviors and testimonies of a wider variety of Porteños rather than their regional representatives.

In my research I did not focus on the most obvious examples of cultural politics in the region, such as the Contra War itself and the subsequent formation of regional councils that were composed of representatives with an official ethnic label. Rather, I chose to focus on a series of more mundane expressions of the role of racial and cultural ideologies in the life of Puerto Cabezas. My findings are significant because they complicate our understanding of role of racial categories in Puerto Cabezas by demonstrating the complicated ways in which these categories intersect with regional and class-based distinctions that have specific meanings in Puerto Cabezas.
From Company Time to Sandino Time

The 1979 overthrow of the Somoza dictatorship and the subsequent ascension to power of the FSLN abruptly marked the end of “company time” in Puerto Cabezas. Not coincidentally, the events of 1979 led to the emergence of Puerto Cabezas as a Miskito Indian city in the discourse of Costeños. Whereas during “company time” the political and economic environment of the city promoted Creole self-identification, “Sandino time” (as Costeños commonly refer to the period from 1979 to 1990) witnessed the rise of Indian self-identification. The upheavals of “Sandino time” also resulted in a political power shift away from Porteños and towards recent migrants from “the communities” who had been displaced by the Contra War. Given the nature of racial ideologies in the region, specifically with regard to extant rural-urban dynamics, the influx of war refugees into the city was perceived through a racial lens such that the influx of rural Costeños was experienced as a Miskitoization of the city. This perception was greatly sharpened by the fact that this influx of rural Costeños went hand in hand with the rapid decapitalization of resource-extracting industries, which had provided the material underpinning to the Creole identification.

The political and economic changes of “Sandino time” had an acute impact on the construction, transformation, and mobilization of racial ideologies in Puerto Cabezas. In the 1980s Puerto Cabezas became the political center of a self-proclaimed Miskito Indian resurgence-cum-insurgency that was understood internationally as quintessential cases of “ethnic conflict,” “cultural clash,” and the “national question.” This conflict was presumed to have taken place as a result of the narrowly defined cultural differences between the Miskito Indians of the Atlantic Coast and the ethnically Latin American revolutionaries of the Pacific Coast. I argue that the opposition of Costeños to the revolutionary program should be understood as a product of cultural differences (when these are defined as language, religion, and customs), and also as the product of the perception that the revolutionary government would isolate the region and push it further away from its people’s cosmopolitan ideal. This also can be seen as a kind of cultural clash, but not the sort posited in the literature on the period, which traced the conflict to culturally based, culturally rooted “misunderstandings” between Sandinistas and Miskitos.
A great deal of academic attention has been devoted to providing a more refined explanation for the causes of this conflict by incorporating so-called historical, ethnic, and cultural factors into the analysis. This effort suffers from the problem of diminishing return. Bluntly stated, the Mosquito Coast crisis of the 1980s resulted directly from the cold war geopolitical maneuvering of the US State Department and the Soviet Union. In this sense the causes of the crisis are not mysterious. Therefore, to set the analysis of culture and history to the interpretive task of revealing the underlying causes of the Mosquito Coast crisis represents, in the end, a misguided effort (unless, of course, it was the case that the gaze of this analysis was directed at the makers of the cold war in the Pentagon and the Kremlin). It is, however, a productive endeavor to shed light on the impact of the political and economic convulsions of the 1980s (only one of which was the Contra War) on the ways in which racial and cultural discourses were mobilized in Puerto Cabezas in the period from 1979 to the present.

Decapitalization and Abandonment

It is generally held, both inside and outside of Nicaragua, that the single most important factor in the ethnic conflict of the 1980s was the attempt by the national government in the Pacific to control and govern the Mosquito Coast region, which, through Pacific Nicaraguan neglect and self-interest, had never been fully integrated into Nicaraguan national life. This historical feature of Nicaraguan politics generated deeply rooted cultural differences between the inhabitants of the Pacific Coast and the inhabitants of the Atlantic Coast. These differences, in turn, were presumed to lie at the heart of Costeño resistance to Nicaraguan rule in the 1980s, as Costeños were presumed to have been intolerant of subordination at the hands of cultural and ethnic “others.”

However, in the testimonies of my informants in 1992 and 1993, I found that the issues that Costeños found most intolerable were the economic deprivations and changes that had occurred after the Sandinista Revolution. They blamed most of these deprivations on the Revolution. The lack of wage labor opportunities, particularly in the agro-industrial sector, caused by the flight of North American companies stood out in the minds of my informants as the most prominent of these deprivations. Given the importance for Porteños of their collective self-image as a
cosmopolitan people, the decapitalization in the region had significant social and cultural ramifications beyond the purely economic hardships that it produced.

In my interviews with Porteños about “Sandino time” in Puerto Cabezas, my informants consistently returned to, in one form or another, the theme of “abandonment.” Whereas in their testimonies about Puerto Cabezas before the Revolution, they nostalgically emphasized the connection of the city to the wider world, as well as its “action” (movimiento), their post-revolutionary descriptions emphasized the feeling of isolation and stagnation that set in during the economic and political upheaval of the 1980s. In the minds of Porteños, Puerto Cabezas had become a forsaken place that despite its increasing population and nominal political and administrative importance no longer offered its residents the kind of life that they once enjoyed (and were perceived to have enjoyed) in the past. Porteños did not simply lament the high levels of unemployment that resulted from the flight of the resource-extracting foreign companies that had once pumped jobs and dollars into the regional economy. Equally prominent in their testimonies was the sense of being isolated and disconnected from the wider world. This isolation was evidenced by, among other things, their reference to the lack of activity on the pier, the disrepair of the city’s houses, the immigration of the so-called “original Port People” to the United States, the unwillingness of these immigrants to return to Puerto Cabezas to visit, the absence of working foreigners in the city (as opposed to the leftist political tourists who visited the city throughout the 80s and 90s and almost always disappointed Porteños by their casual dress and their frugal spending habits), and also the chronic shortage of goods, particularly those goods that had been associated with company time. These goods included items such as clothes, appliances, flour, and small North American goods, from playing cards to flashlights.

Porteños unwaveringly described the situations in Puerto Cabezas as lamentable. In Spanish, one of the adjectives that my informants most frequently used to describe Puerto Cabezas was “palmado,” which is a slang term that denotes destitution and poverty. In our endless conversations about the extreme levels of poverty and violence in the city, one of my key informants constantly used the refrain “pobre Bilwi” to describe the present state of affairs. In Miskitu, my informants...
described Puerto Cabezas during “Sandino time” as “sari” (sad) because there was no work and no money (work apu, lalah apu). This sentiment did not change with the electoral defeat of the Sandinista administration in 1990. Puerto Cabezas continues to be abandonado (abandoned).

The fact that the hardships of the postrevolutionary period in Puerto Cabezas should have been experienced as abandonment speaks to the importance for Porteños of maintaining cultural, social, and economic ties with the rest of the world. This outward-looking orientation is a defining characteristic of Costeños that North American ethnographers have noted throughout the century, although they generally have recognized this as a Miskito trait (Conzemius 1932; Helms 1971; Dennis and Olien 1984). Costeños generally expect the events and actors of the international arena to affect their lives, and at times this clearly leads them to overestimate the degree to which these events are likely to impinge on their world.

Costeño receptiveness towards high-status outsiders has also been noted throughout the ethnographic literature, and nothing I observed in Puerto Cabezas contradicted this observation. Indeed, this trait proved to be enormously helpful during my research, as Porteños eagerly volunteered to speak with me (a Miskitu-speaking Latino gringo of “Spanish” Nicaraguan and Costa Rican parentage) without hesitation about topics that I expected to invite greater reticence. I also observed that despite the city’s early history of racial violence and also despite Porteños near obsession with racial banter (particularly pertaining to skin color), the people of Puerto Cabezas and the Atlantic Coast are surprisingly racially tolerant. Porteños recognize that Puerto Cabezas had always been a place inhabited by many different “razas” and “naciones” (races and nations). Indeed, during “company time” the presence of people from near and far parts of world (Chinese, Turks, Italians, Japanese, Jamaicans, Hondurans, Mexicans, Germans, gringos and others) served as welcome indication to Porteños of the economic vitality of the port and of the region.1

As a consequence of the Revolution, the demography of the population of Puerto Cabezas radically changed as refugees from the Miskitu-speaking Coco River region entered the city by the thousands. Simultaneously, the Creole elite and Chinese merchants fled the city. Government administrators and soldiers from Managua (whose numbers
had previously been far fewer) flooded the region, particularly Puerto Cabezas. The upshot of these changes was that Puerto Cabezas became far less international and racially diverse. My Porteño informants regarded this fact as symptomatic of the “abandonment” of the city.

Porteños distinguish themselves from other Costeños on the basis of their ability to speak Spanish and relate well with “Spaniards.” They take pride in their own multilingualism (English, Spanish, and Miskitu), which they contrast to the monolingualism of English-speaking areas to the south and Miskitu-speaking areas to the west and north. Porteños universally recognize the importance of multilingualism and they regard this trait as being an integral part of being “prepared” (preparada), an important and commonly used term that can be translated as educated or sophisticated. To be “prepared” means to have the necessary education and formally acquired skills to succeed in a profession (carrera). Preparation, apart from being a mark of personal refinement, also places one in a position to attain a job of high prestige, which in Puerto Cabezas is defined as those jobs that spare one from routine manual labor. Hence, in Nicaragua, no matter how much folk knowledge a campesino may have with regard to agricultural techniques, he or she would never be described as preparada. Porteños view themselves as being more highly prepared than other Costeños on the basis of their multilingualism and their greater access to formal education and training given by foreign companies, missionary churches, and the Nicaraguan state.

Notwithstanding the abandonment of the region, Porteños view the relatively more advanced infrastructure (running water, electricity, roads, etc.) of the city in comparison to other regions of the Mosquito Coast as another indication of the privilege and, indeed, superiority, of Porteños. During my fieldwork in Puerto Cabezas, Porteños manifested this self-perception in a multitude of ways, including (as I illustrate in this chapter) popular jokes. The following case provides a clear illustration of this attitude, particularly as it relates to multilingualism.

**The Atlantic Series**

During my stay in Puerto Cabezas I participated as a player in a number of sports leagues, and I came to establish good rapport with many of the athletes and athletic boosters of the city. For that reason, when the city organized its all-star baseball team to send to the annual
intra-regional championship, popularly known as the Serie del Atlántico, or Atlantic Series, I was allowed to tag along with the team as an anthropologist/mascot. That year the series was held in Pearl Lagoon, a predominantly English-speaking commercial fishing-oriented city in the southern region that is accessible only by canal and river.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the city of Pearl Lagoon was an important political center in Mosquito and the Mosquito Reserve, and today is considered, next to Bluefields, which lies twenty kilometers to the south, the second-most important city of the RAAS, the South Atlantic Autonomous Region. Pearl Lagoon has, since the nineteenth century, generally been recognized as a distinctly Creole town. The opportunity to travel with a large group of Porteños to Pearl Lagoon provided an excellent opportunity to study regional ideologies at work in a traditional and relatively depoliticized setting.

Since the late 1940s, the major cities of the Atlantic Coast region organized and sent delegations to the Serie del Atlántico. The much-celebrated tournament represented by far the most important sporting event of the region and, indeed, was one of the few occasions in which Costeños from all over the region gathered together in a social context. In the expansive Atlantic Coast region, where north-south roads of any kind do not exist and where the smallest overland journey can become a swamplike ordeal, the logistics of moving people and cargo in large volumes has been historically only within the reach of large industrial and commercial interests. The “Synod” meetings of the Moravian Church, held every three years and attended by delegates from Moravian congregations throughout the Mosquito Coast, represented the only other civic event of comparable scope and magnitude. In the 1980s the emergence of meetings of the “Indigenous Assembly” has provided an example of a pan-regional meeting that, significantly, is officially mono-ethnic in contrast to the ethnically unmarked Church meetings and sporting events.

In 1993, eight twenty-man baseball teams from Waspán, Rosita, Puerto Cabezas, Karawala, Corn Island, Bluefields, Kukra Hill, and Pearl Lagoon descended on Pearl Lagoon for a week of competition in the Serie del Atlántico. In the months leading up to the tournament, rumors had circulated in Puerto Cabezas that none of the northern delegations would be able to attend the tournament because of the lack of “economic resources.” The baseball “Federation,” the committee composed
of leading citizens of the city who are known popularly as “gente gruesa” (literally, thick people), “gente de billete” (monied people), or “upla tara” (literally, big people in Miskitu), announced that it did not have the money to provide adequate uniforms, equipment, and, most importantly, transportation to Pearl Lagoon.

Porteños regarded this crisis as yet another example of the lamentable state of affairs of the port and of Nicaragua in general. They most commonly referred to this state of affairs simply as “the situation” or “la situación.” They recalled that in the past, sports in the city had been financed largely by the foreign companies operating in the region. Also, commercial activity of the port during “company time” had allowed greater access to sporting equipment such as bats, balls, and uniforms. My older Porteño informants boasted that during “company time” their uniforms were as attractive as those used in the “Big Leagues” (US Major League Baseball) and they only used top-quality equipment. They also recalled traveling to Bluefields and the south on comfortable transport ships at the expense of the companies.

However, in contrast to the general perception in the city that “Sandino time” brought hardship, Porteño athletes recalled that the conditions for them actually improved during the 1980s. On a number of occasions the Puerto Cabezas team was flown to the tournament on Soviet-donated transport planes flown by the Sandinista Air Force. Many Porteño athletes also reported fondly the experience of competing and receiving athletic and professional training in Cuba and Managua. In many ways, athletics during the Sandinista period was the one of the few areas in which Porteños did not feel “abandoned.” In fact, apart from the much-despised military service, athletics represented one of the few avenues for young men and women from Puerto Cabezas to acquire “preparation” through scholarships and national and international travel.

In 1993, after last-second appeals by the Federation to citizens and institutions of the city, a foreign fishing company agreed to contribute the use of a shrimp-fishing boat on the condition that the Federation would provide fuel and crew. Despite the vociferous protests from the players, the players from the northern delegations (Waspám, Rosita, and Puerto Cabezas) and I piled into a small, diesel-powered boat that reeked of dead fish for a sixteen-hour trip, unprotected from the tropical sun.
and rains. In the meantime, government officials and wealthy merchants chartered planes for the thirty-minute plane flight to Pearl Lagoon.

Players and fans expressed to me at great length throughout the weeklong tournament the pathetic state of affairs in the region and the deprivations that they had to suffer as a result of the “situation.” In their testimonies this current situation stood in sharp contrast to “company time” and “Sandino time,” when, according to these athletes (many of whom were in their twenties or younger), sufficient resources were available to support athletes.

It became apparent immediately upon arriving in Bluefields and then Pearl Lagoon that English was the prestige language of the region’s cities. My informants explained to me that the major cities of the region had few “Indians” and were populated mostly by English-speaking “Black people” (“Negros”). In the testimonies of the players and fans, the appeal to the distinction between “Indians” and “Blacks” was common. For example, it was common knowledge that the “Black man” teams were consistently the strongest and were not supposed to lose to “Indian teams.” Two teams were generally referred to as Indian teams, Waspáam from the North and Karawala, a southern community at the mouth of the Rio Grande. The fact that these teams possessed old and deteriorating uniforms and equipment was entirely consistent with the association, in the minds of Costeños, between material poverty and being Indian. The players from Waspáam and Karawala primarily spoke Miskitu to one another but they were generally conversant in English. The team from Rosita (one of three interior mine cities that along with Siuna and Bonanza are known collectively as “the mines”) was regarded as a Spaniard team, a perception that is also consistent with the official status of the mines as a Mestizo area of the RAAN.

On the other hand, the four remaining southern teams (Corn Island, Bluefields, Pearl Lagoon, and Kukra Hill) were regarded as “Black man” teams—a label that, in light of the regional association of relative material wealth and being Creole, was also consistent with their superior uniforms and equipment. The Black players and fans from Bluefields and Corn Island particularly distinguished themselves on the basis of possessing the latest Nike shoes, gold chains, and portable stereos with latest funk and rap music from the United States. My Porteño informants explained to me, somewhat enviously, that the “Bluefields boy them” have close ties to the big cities of the United States, such as
Miami, Houston, and New York. For that reason, in the words of one of my informants, they “think they are in Miami.”

Interestingly, Porteños regarded their own team, their own city, and ultimately their own self as being fundamentally mixed. Among the players on the team it was generally accepted that all of the pitchers were “Indians from the communities” and that all the rest of the players were “Port boys.” In fact the pitchers did come from nearby villages such as Kambla, Lamlaya, Sísín, and Twappi, communities that lie within the municipality of Puerto Cabezas. These pitchers told me that, although they received almost no money for playing baseball, they lived in Puerto Cabezas in order to play baseball at a more competitive level and to “pass time.” Also they explained to me that there was little work or diversion in the communities, so they did not mind staying with their family members in Puerto Cabezas. They all spoke Miskitu, some Spanish and English as well. Many of the self-proclaimed “Port boys” who distinguished themselves from the players “from the communities” also spoke fluent Miskitu and had kin ties throughout the region.

In formal and informal team meetings and conversations in which I participated, I noticed that the “Port boys” complained that the Indian pitchers lacked guile and sophistication in their pitching style. Many of them attributed the team’s lack of success in the tournament to the inferior pitching of the pitching staff. They recognized that the pitchers had plenty of throwing velocity. Velocity is an essential talent that, like stature in basketball, is regarded to be innate. It was precisely on the basis of their demonstrated pitching velocity that they were chosen over the pitchers from Puerto Cabezas.

The criticisms that were made against the Indian pitchers corresponded to the racial stereotypes predominant in Puerto Cabezas. Namely, these criticisms corresponded with the historically rooted perception of the Indian as an unskilled laborer who, like a pack animal, makes a living from his or her brute force. In contrast, Porteños have throughout the century highly valued the ability to enter into more “skilled” positions within the regional economy. Consequently, Porteños perceive themselves as being more intelligent, worldly, and sophisticated in comparison to “simple” Indians. As I described in previous chapters, “from the communities” is a description that heavily implies Indianess, while being Porteño implies certain characteristics and lifestyles such as “preparation,” intelligence, year-round skilled or semi-skilled work, and
urbanity, which are more associated with being Black than with being Indian. Hence, when players appealed to stereotypes about the distinction between “Port boys” and pitchers “from the communities,” they were simultaneously, yet not exclusively, invoking both race (Indian vs. Black and Spaniard) and culture (urban vs. rural, skilled vs. unskilled, civilized vs. uncivilized).

What is important to note about this case is that the same individuals who referred to the Indian pitchers as “brutos” (stupid) in a racialized way were themselves people who at some level proudly considered themselves Indians. Clearly, the ostensibly geographical categories of Porteño vs. “from the communities” were crosscut in complicated ways by racial and cultural categories that were deeply imbedded in the dynamic regional political economy.

I also observed that among Porteños the division of the Indian category along racial and cultural fault lines was paralleled by the division of the Black category as well. This phenomenon was most clearly illustrated by a series of jokes about the allegedly primitive people of Pearl Lagoon that were told by a self-proclaimed Black man of the Puerto Cabezas baseball team. Upon our return to Puerto Cabezas, I joined a group of young men who had gathered around Ted, a charismatic veteran baseball player, as he was describing in English his impressions of Pearl Lagoon. Ted remarked to the group how “primitive” life in Pearl Lagoon was in comparison to Puerto Cabezas. He noted that only a few cars existed in the entire city and he drew laughter from the crowd when he noted that all the streets were paved with grass. He also made fun of the sporadic and limited electrical service in the city that every evening left people from Pearl Lagoon talking on their porches in the darkness. The crowd received with much merriment his mimicry of a toothless elderly blind man swatting mosquitos in the darkness.

Continuing with the theme of the backwardness of Pearl Lagoon and its people, Ted went on to note that, in contrast to “Port people,” the “Black men” of Pearl Lagoon spoke Spanish very poorly. He told the following two jokes, among others, as humorous illustrations of this phenomenon:

A Spaniard went to Lagoon to visit one friend. When the Spaniard reached the woman house she said, “Que tal amiga?” [How are you,
friend?]. The woman got vexed [angry] and said, “You come to my house and call me tall and meager!”

Later, another Spaniard gone to the house and said, “Como está?” And the old man on the porch turned round and said, “Eh, Esther someone looking you.”

In both of these jokes the buffoon is the monolingual English speaker from Pearl Lagoon whose inability to understand basic Spanish causes an embarrassing misunderstanding. In the first joke, the person mistakes the Spanish words tal amiga for the English words “tall” and “meager” and therefore wrongly takes offense. In the second, the old man mistakes Como está? for the English command, “Come Esther.”

These jokes illustrate a series of widespread attitudes on the part of Porteños, the relevance of which has often been ignored in the accounts the region. First, Porteños highly value their own ability to speak Spanish, as well as English and Miskitu. This simple observation, trivial as it may seem, stands in contrast to the oversimplified view present in much of the social science and journalism about the region that contended that the crisis of the 1980s was caused by a cultural and linguistic clash in which the Pacific Nicaraguan government was rejected on the basis of the Costeño rejection of alien culture and language. Second, this case demonstrates the role of regionally based distinctions (in this case Porteño vs. non-Porteño) that crosscut racial categories (e.g., Creoles, Miskitos, and Spaniards). In much of the literature on the region, analysts have neglected the former and insisted on a reified and essentialist interpretation of the latter.

Race and Myth in Indian Bilwi

When Porteños invoke ideas about the neighborhoods of the city of Puerto Cabezas in their quotidian dealings with one another and with powerful institutions, they reveal class distinctions and spatially based distinctions that intersect in complicated ways with racial and cultural ideologies. Neighborhoods in Puerto Cabezas are spatial divisions in the city that are frequently discussed. Porteños perceive certain neighborhoods as having particular racial compositions, and these racial compositions are believed to help determine the behaviors of its residents, as well as justify the historical and contemporary relationships between
different groups in the city. In turn, Porteño ideologies of race are contested and transformed in the practice of daily life in Puerto Cabezas.

Although in the minds of present day Portenos, the founding of Puerto Cabezas is synonymous with the foundation of Bragman’s Bluff Lumber Company, all recognize that the history of Puerto Cabezas predates the arrival of the company. Far from a matter of mere historical curiosity, the fact of Bilwi’s Miskito Indian past impinges on the present of Puerto Cabezas on a daily basis. Although many deny it, others lament it, and still others glorify it, Bilwi was, and therefore is, “indian tasbaika”—a very charged Miskitu concept that means Indian land.

The city’s Indian origin serves as a point of contention in a number of contexts. Most importantly, many residents of Puerto Cabezas, regardless of any ethnic affiliation that they may assert, must pay the community of Karatá, a Miskito Indian village fifteen kilometers to the south, a form of yearly rent. Karatá has since the 1920s successfully claimed that the land on which Puerto Cabezas now lies represents “pasture land” guaranteed to Karatá under the terms of the Harrison-Altamirano Treaty of 1905. The obligation to pay rent to Karatá creates a great deal of confusion and controversy in the city and is frequently the subject of debate. Specifically, the terms of this debate center on the issue of the validity of indigenous land claims. However, on a more general level this debate represents a matter of everyday relevance to Portenos through which they develop and contest ideologies of racial and ethnic worth.

Although Portenos take a wide variety of stances with regard to the legitimacy of Miskito, and especially Karatá Miskito, land claims in Puerto Cabezas, it remains a matter of uncontested collective memory that a Miskito man named Noah Columbus was the original inhabitant of Bilwi. During fieldwork in Puerto Cabezas, I collected many stories dealing with the first inhabitants of Bilwi, which I will refer to as “founding myths.”8 The content of some of these myths varied a great deal, while others contained a remarkable degree of consistency relative to one another regardless of any ethnic or geographic (Atlantic/Pacific) affiliation of the speaker.

A Costeño born in the Pacific who had resided for the majority of his fifty years in Puerto Cabezas explained to me the origins of the city of Puerto Cabezas: “Before the US company came there lived a family
here. There was a Miskito named Noah Columbus. He lived out there by those tanks by the Moravian Hospital. Now that place is called El Cocal. But in those days they were the only people who lived in Bilwi. You know that this place is called Bilwi in Miskito? All this around where we are was bush. Over there in El Cocal is where Bilwi began.”

This quote expresses a number of common themes in the “founding myths” that I heard and collected in Puerto Cabezas. These founding myths all emphasize that Bilwi is the original name of the area, and that pre-company Bilwi had a small population, all of which was Miskito. Informants consistently portrayed Bilwi as having been an unimportant settlement with regard to both size and commerce. In fact, it is significant that many versions include the detail that Noah Columbus and his family members were the only inhabitants of Bilwi. It is also generally recognized that Noah Columbus lived in a place that has come to be known as a neighborhood of Puerto Cabezas called El Cocal.

Porteños regard El Cocal as a neighborhood that is overwhelmingly populated by Miskito Indians. Official surveys and census reflect this perception. The neighborhood witnessed a dramatic rise of population in the early 1980s as communities along the Coco River were uprooted as a result of the Contra War and the forced evacuation of the region. Thus, Porteños, although recognizing that El Cocal has always possessed a high concentration of Miskito residents, view the majority of current residents of the neighborhood as being recent immigrants from rural and riverine communities. Given that Porteños, regardless of any and all ethnic identifications they may adopt, associate Indianness with rurality and with backwardness, it is not surprising to find that El Cocal carries the reputation of being an impoverished, unsanitary, and unsafe neighborhood.

During my stay in Puerto Cabezas, radio reports frequently decried the increase of crime in the city that began at the end of the Contra War, presumably as a result of the demobilization of Contra and Sandinista troops. These reports often singled out El Cocal as the most crime-ridden of neighborhoods. I was frequently warned to avoid El Cocal at night because “los Miskitos de allá” (those Miskitos) assault and rob people indiscriminately. A frequent explanation given to me for this perceived peril was that El Cocal contained a lot of “bush people” or “gente de las comunidades” (from the communities) or “upla sinskas” (ignorant
people in Miskitu) who had fought in the civil war and had retained their weapons.

The concept of the “community” [Costeño settlement or village] is a salient native category that carries many highly charged associations, both negative and positive, for Costeños. Spanish speakers use the term *comunidad* and this term is also sometimes used in Miskitu but with the distinctive Miskitu pronunciation that stresses the first syllable of every word, thus *cómunidad*. However, the most common equivalent term used by Miskitu speakers is *tawan*, a word that is probably based on the English word “town.” In the Atlantic Coast this term refers specifically to Costeño villages, not Spanish-speaking campesino villages. Both of these terms distinguish small, relatively isolated settlements from larger cities that have had more ties with Pacific Nicaragua and the Caribbean, such as Puerto Cabezas, Bluefields, Waspám, Rosita, and Siuna.

The fear of Miskitos from the communities represents a new popular perception of Miskitos that undoubtedly resulted from the Contra War, in which community residents, especially those along the Coco River, were recruited and trained (at times forcibly) by the Contras and the CIA in Honduras to attack Nicaraguan targets. Those Costeños who fought for the Contras came predominantly from inland rural villages close to the Honduran border and not from coastal areas farther to the south, such as Puerto Cabezas. The process of demilitarization and disarmament posed serious problems for the UNO (Unión Nacional Opositora, National Opposition Union) government in the Atlantic Coast, and indeed all of the country. The fact that many civilians in the RAAN (the North Atlantic Autonomous Region) have remained armed creates an environment of uncertainty and unease among Porteños. This unease is heightened by the frequent reports of supply trucks from the Pacific being hijacked by roving bands of Miskito ex-combatants on the remote dirt roads that lead to Puerto Cabezas.

This general feeling of insecurity, whose root lies in the foreign-sponsored Contra War of the 1980s, manifests itself in the form of ethnic, racial, and rural-urban stereotypes and epithets that have proliferated in the city. Porteños, including Miskitu-speakers, reminisce about the days before the people from “the communities” arrived, allegedly bringing with them violent behaviors. Other individuals find fodder for arguments about the innate savagery and brutality of Indians in general. José,
a Puerto Cabezas-born self-proclaimed Miskito, told me: “Before people would fight with their fists . . . sometimes with knives if it was serious. But now with these Miskitos if you fight with one of them they go home and return to kill you in the street with an AKA [automatic rifle].”

I commonly received warnings such as the following from longtime residents of the city: “Miskito man them BAD! You better watch your ass, Barón.” Many Porteños harkened back to the days when there were fewer “bush people” and Miskito people knew their place. Residents created for themselves an idealized past in which Miskito were docile and respectful, which contrasts with the present where they are perceived to be violent and uppity. The end result has been that in Puerto Cabezas, rural and Miskito has in some contexts come to be ideologically associated with armed and dangerous. Although levels of violent crime have no doubt risen in the aftermath of the Contra War, in many ways this proliferation of negative stereotypes of community-born Miskitos reflect more a resentment of the increased political power and aspirations of Miskito organizations by Porteños rather than an actual rise in violent crimes perpetuated by Miskitos of rural origins living in El Cocal.

Apart from attributing criminal traits to residents of El Cocal, many Porteños also characterize them as ignorant and uncivilized. In direct response to my questions, informants portrayed the neighborhood extremely negatively. In addition, I found that in social-group contexts, El Cocal had the unfortunate distinction of being the target of jokes and teasing related to supposed ignorance and barbarity. Statements like “What a stupid thing to do, he must be from El Cocal” abounded. The widespread and closely related prejudices against both Indian and rural origins found specific expression in negative characterizations of El Cocal residents. That is to say, in Puerto Cabezas (including among people who either shun or embrace identification as Miskito) those negative images of what it means to be Miskito and to be from a community cohere around these negative characterizations of El Cocal. As a neighborhood within a larger city, El Cocal has come to stand for, to embody, those negative characteristics that are at times attributed to rural people and Miskito people respectively, thereby ideologically inscribing prejudice on the urban landscape.
Returning to the founding myths, it is interesting to note that the folklore of the city locates the founder of Bilwi in El Cocal, a neighborhood that since the Contra War has come to evoke otherness for Porteños. The most crucial, and undisputed, detail of the Puerto Cabezas founding myth is that Noah Columbus was a Miskito man. The myth functions to unequivocally establish Bilwi in pre-company time as an Indian place. Yet ironically, as a result of the influx of rural, particularly Wangki (Coco River) Miskito, El Cocal, which before had stood for and reinforced Miskito nativist claims, now has come to be associated with the unfamiliar and uncultivated Miskito. Within this new ideological landscape, the efficacy of El Cocal and Noah Columbus as symbols continues to be transformed and challenged.

However, by far the most controversial issue that relates to the foundation of Puerto Cabezas deals not with the relationship between the gringos, Miskitos, and Spaniards; rather, it deals with relationship between Bilwi and Karatá, two villages that have historically been regarded as Indian. As I mentioned above, all Porteños cannot help but be aware, given that many must pay rent to Karatá, that the community of Karatá exercises special land rights in Puerto Cabezas. Most are unaware of the obscure juridical base of this relationship. However, many of the founding myths provide an explanation for this state of affairs—a state of affairs that many Porteños regard as particularly unjust. The following narrative related to me in Miskitu by a middle-aged Porteño approximates the most common version of such a myth that I encountered.

This is how it was. In the first time Noah Columbus lived here with his family. He was the leader of Bilwi . . . he had the title. Everything was good, lots of food, lots of turtle, no Spaniards. But he liked to drink rum. One day the boss of Karatá came and as they started to play cards he brought out some bottles of rum. Noah Columbus got really drunk—*blocked up, man.* He kept on losing, he lost a lot of money. That’s how he lost the title to Bilwi. The boss from Karatá went home happy. The next morning when Noah woke up he said, “Oh, shit!”

The key feature of this story, one that is repeated in many others, is that Noah Columbus had possessed a legal title that documented his
personal ownership of Bilwi, and this was lost to people from Karatá as a result of drunken folly. In other versions, informants emphasized that the title had come from the Miskito King or the British. In still other versions, Noah Columbus is said to have gotten drunk off American whiskey, implying Karatá's complicity with US companies. In other versions he is said to have lost the title to Bilwi either after or before the arrival of Bragman's Bluff Lumber Company.

For those Porteños who are hostile to Karatá land rights, the story of Noah Columbus losing the land title exemplifies the arbitrariness of Indian land claims, because ownership of the land was so frivolously alienated. For these people, the story also exemplifies the child-like vulnerability that they attribute to Indian people. For anti-Indian Porteños in general, the story serves to confirm the commonly held position that Indians are savage, uncivilized, and unable to care for themselves in an urban setting. Specifically, the story confirms another commonly held prejudice against Miskito men that claims they are unable to “control their liquor” (*tienen mal guaro* in Spanish).

On the other hand, for those who support Indian land claims, the story reinforces the conviction that the region is rightfully Indian *tasbaika* regardless of which community holds title to the land. Similarly, the story serves to reinforce the notion that each Miskito community has at one time possessed a legal document that guarantees possession of the land that it occupies from encroachment by the Nicaraguan government. Those versions that mention that Noah Columbus received the title from the British government serve to legitimize Miskito land claims by appealing to the authority of a country regarded as more important than Nicaragua. Many Porteños recognize that at some point in the past, the Miskito King and the British government exercised an alliance in opposition to the Nicaraguan and Spanish governments.

Nevertheless, I found the issue of the role of the British was not viewed as particularly important or controversial. For most, *King taim* (Miskitu for the period in which the Miskito King, in collaboration with the British, ruled the region) is viewed as a distant age whose legacy does not impinge on modern times. The US banana and lumber companies, rather than the governments of Nicaragua, Great Britain, the United States, or Mosquito, represent by far the most important actors in the historical imagination of Porteños.
The Beach: Creole Neighborhood or Indigenous Community?

Reference to the Noah Columbus local folklore plays a significant role in current land disputes. Viewing these ongoing local disputes as a form of social practice allows us to see the ways in which ideologies of race and culture are formed and transformed in the context of everyday life. During my fieldwork, a land dispute arose between a group of so-called squatter families and a government institution in Puerto Cabezas. I conducted interviews with many of the parties involved, attended community meetings, and observed the activities taking place on the land in question. What immediately drew my attention to the case was that although it ostensibly concerned land tenure, it also simultaneously exposed with great clarity a broad range of crosscutting contradictions and cleavages within Porteño society—particularly those based on race (Miskito vs. Creole), class, and political affiliation (Contras vs. Sandinistas).

The dispute pitted the Port Authority (ENAP—Empresa Nacional de Puertos) of Puerto Cabezas, a public institution created by the Sandinista administration and directed as an agency of the national government in Managua, against residents of the neighborhood known as The Beach. Tensions began to simmer in late 1991 when the Port Authority permitted a small fishing company to build a fish-processing facility directly in front of The Beach in a largely vacant area of land directly between the city pier on the east and the Port Authority headquarters that lies on high ground to the west. Residents, who for many years had disputed the Port Authority’s claim to the vacant strip of land to the west of the pier, protested that they were never consulted about the building of the plant on the disputed land. They also lodged the general complaint that the Port Authority did not take their interests into account.

In October of 1992 certain residents of The Beach started to dig the postholes for houses that they planned to build in the disputed area. The news of the defiant groundbreaking on the disputed site spread rapidly throughout Puerto Cabezas, provoking a great deal of speculation and a general mood of tense anticipation. Both parties issued threats and both parties looked for allies to fortify their respective claim. On a number of occasions armed standoffs and vandalism occurred, but during my stay the contest remained in stalemate.
The Beach, a particularly large and impoverished neighborhood of Puerto Cabezas, occupies a low-lying coastal strip extending approximately one kilometer along the beach south of the city. During the 1980s the Sandinista government imposed Spanish names, El Muelle (The Pier) in the case of The Beach, on the neighborhoods of Puerto Cabezas as part of its revolutionary restructuring of government—a restructuring that in Puerto Cabezas, in contrast to the Pacific Coast, represented an unapologetic Hispanicization program. The pier, built in the 1920s by Bragman’s Bluff Lumber Company, and the main road that connects it to the interior marked the northern boundary of The Beach. The majority of the city of Puerto Cabezas occupies a bluff to the north of the pier that rises five to twenty meters above sea level and protects the majority of the city against hurricanes and flooding. The Beach lies on the lowlands to the south of the bluff and is thus geographically separated from the rest of the city. Large portions of The Beach neighborhood lie directly on swampland and are flooded almost year round, a situation that aggravates health problems related to mosquitoes and the lack of a clean water supply.

For this and other reasons, city planners during the Sandinista administration of the 1980s recommended relocating the entire neighborhood to higher ground in the city. This heavy-handed plan, reminiscent of the massive evacuation of the Coco River during the same period, greatly embittered relations between so-called Beach People and the Sandinistas. After fierce opposition, the Sandinistas abandoned the plan.

The racial composition of The Beach defies categorization within the official system of ethnic categorization that identifies three main ethnic groups (étnicas in Spanish) in the region: Creole, Miskito, and Mestizo. More than any other neighborhood in Puerto Cabezas, trilingualism is the norm in Beach households. I found that in my conversations with Beach People, only few would positively identify themselves as a “member” of any ethnic group. It was never my intention to try to categorize my informants within a system of categorization that they did not accept, but on those occasions when I did bluntly ask a person if he or she was Miskito, Creole, or Mestizo, the most common response was “mix” (a word used in both English and Miskitu). Porteños who did not live in The Beach often referred to the residents of The Beach as Blacks, Negros, and Nikru (in Miskitu), and recognized that English was
the most commonly spoken language. However, there existed no uniformly accepted convention for labeling the race or ethnicity of the residents of the neighborhood.

Beach People derive the majority of their income and subsistence from the sea. The main wage-earning activity for young Beach men is lobster diving, a profession in which they are disproportionately represented in comparison to other neighborhoods of Puerto Cabezas. Lobster diving on foreign-owned (Honduran and Colombian) lobster boats, which sell to a recently opened US-owned lobster exporting company, is by far the highest-paying form of manual labor in the city. Unfortunately, the work is also extremely dangerous and physically demanding. Busos (lobster divers) rarely are able to endure the rigors of diving full time for more than a few years. After a few years, if shark attack or decompression sickness has not injured them, they invariably suffer from dizziness and loss of hearing. Nevertheless, divers are able to earn as much as $500 (paid in US dollars) in a two-week voyage—a salary that very favorably compares to the $100 that a schoolteacher earns monthly. Beach People, particularly men, also engage in artisanal fishing and turtling (turtle hunting) for money and food. Women rarely engage in wage-labor activities. When they do earn money, it is usually through small front-yard stores (ventas in Spanish).

The dispute between the Beach People and the Port Authority resulted from the desire of a group of young men and women to establish households of their own. The majority of the men worked as divers, and had children with women who either lived with their mothers or lived with the young men in the men’s mothers’ houses. These couples longed for the privacy and comfort of their own house, while also desiring the communal and familial support offered by locating their prospective house within the neighborhood. For most young people in Puerto Cabezas, the goal of marrying and living in a separate residence (“independizarse”) is a valued luxury that few can afford. Although the ideal of conjugal neolocality exists in the minds of young Porteños, the harsh realities of a severely depressed economy and residential overcrowding usually prevent the attainment of this goal in practice. In the case of the young divers in question, they had through hard labor saved enough money to buy building materials but could find no adequate site to build within the traditional residential areas of the neighborhood. They
therefore turned to the vacant lot between the pier and the Port Author-
ity headquarters as a place in which they should rightfully be allowed to
erect a house.

Immediately upon their digging the first postholes, Port Authority
officials informed them that they were trespassing on Port Authority
land. Officials threatened to use the police to stop construction and
ordered the men to remove all building materials from the site. The men
flatly refused, arguing that the land was not being used by the Port
Authority and ironically (given that they shared the pro-Contra tenden-
cies of their neighbors) borrowed a Sandinista agrarian reform slogan
stating that the “land belonged to those who would work it.” They also
organized themselves into an ad hoc commission, called the Comisión
del Barrio El Muelle, which was composed of seventeen families. The
Port Authority, hoping for a quick and unequivocal resolution to the
matter, beseeched the police to evict the families, but for a number of
reasons, which I will now outline, this strategic appeal to police author-
ity did not work.

After the election of 1990, which was won by the anti-Sandinista
UNO party, the issue of the partisan nature of the army and police rep-
resented one of the most serious challenges to peace in Nicaragua. This
issue was particularly explosive in the northern Atlantic region, adjacent
to Honduras, where Contra activity had been strongest and where the
civil war had been most bitter. Contra leadership agreed to demobilize
and return to Nicaragua only on the condition that they be allowed to
join and at times lead the police forces in the areas in which they
planned to return to. Some factions of the UNO party even demanded
that President Chamorro dissolve the EPS (Sandinista Popular Army)
and replace it with an entirely new army and police force consisting of
ex-Contras and new recruits. Many feared at this time that if Chamorro
were to take such an extreme measure, the EPS would rebel and choose
to not serve the new administration—in effect launching another civil
war. Nicaraguans also feared that the opposing forces would carry out
bloody vendettas against one another once they were united as
civilians within Nicaraguan territory. Chamorro adopted a conciliatory
tactic, reducing the EPS from about 80,000 to 20,000 soldiers and
reappointing Humberto Ortega, brother of former President Daniel
Ortega, as its leader on the condition that he resign from the Sandinista
Directorate and swear to obey the authority of the popularly elected UNO government.

In Puerto Cabezas, the capital of the North Atlantic Autonomous Region (RAAN), ex-Contra leaders took top positions within the police force, and many ex-Contra soldiers joined a special new armed force formed with the help of the UN and the OAS (Organization of American States) called the Disarmament Brigade. The UNO government drastically reduced the size of the EPS in the region but did not significantly change its leadership or attempt to incorporate Contra elements within it. Thus, the police force, which contained high-ranking officers from the ranks of the EPS as well as ex-Contra combatants, represented the only government-sanctioned armed body in the region that incorporated both Sandinista and Contra elements, although Contras held the highest positions. Men and women, who months before had stood on opposite sides of a ten-year civil war, now intermingled in the police station of Puerto Cabezas. Fortunately, in this case, this polarization within the police force greatly hampered the ability of the institution to make decisions and act uniformly.

The two political affiliations contributed to the police force’s unwillingness to use force or other types of influence to resolve the matter. In general, the UNO party favored returning to the original owner land that had been expropriated by the Sandinistas. The Sandinistas had confiscated and nationalized the Port Authority in 1980, and the institution continued to be associated with and controlled by individuals with Sandinista affiliations. In addition, many of the Beach People in question had Contra leanings or indeed had at one point either served in the Contra forces or lived as refugees in Honduras. Thus the Contra-led mixed police force was hesitant to act to protect Sandinista-tainted interests against the pro-Contra residents of the neighborhood. Members of the Comisión del Barrio El Muelle explained to me that they made every attempt in their dealings with the police to bring this contradiction to the fore as they appealed to other shared Contra loyalties. This initial strategy proved successful, as the Port Authority ceased to threaten police action and agreed to form a special commission that would investigate the matter. Such an appeal to political affiliation was related to, but not wholly dependent upon, ethnic or racial affiliation.
In the meantime, residents approached the local YATAMA office for assistance. (YATAMA is Yapti Tasba Masraka Nani Alsatakanka in Miskitu, translated as “Descendants of Mother Earth.”) YATAMA, composed mainly of ex-combatants within the Miskito wing of the Contra armies, emerged after the war as an aggressively indigenous Miskito political organization. A number of officials from YATAMA agreed to advocate for the residents and immediately sent a letter to the police in which they urged restraint and emphasized that the land dispute was not a simple squatter problem, but rather it was a problem related to indigenous rights. At a meeting called by the Port Authority and attended by local and national civil and military leaders, Rigoberto Carpentier, a YATAMA official representing the “17 families,” proclaimed that “The Beach is not a neighborhood [barrio] rather it is an indigenous community.” He explained that the Harrison-Altamirano Treaty guaranteed that Miskito communities would have legal title to their traditional lands. The Standard Fruit Company, according to him, recognized these rights and rented lands from the indigenous community. Later, when the company ceased operation, the Nicaraguan government took possession of the lands around the pier, but neither the government nor the Standard Fruit Company ever owned this land. It was “Indian tasbaika” (Indian land) and therefore belonged to the residents of The Beach, which he now redefined as an indigenous community.

Pedro Martinez, a high-ranking official from the national office of the Port Authority who had been sent from Managua to take charge of the situation, followed Carpentier’s speech with a speech defending the position of the Port Authority. He argued somewhat contradictorily that any arguments based on turn-of-the-century treaties were legally irrelevant, while simultaneously delegitimizing The Beach’s land claims on the grounds that the majority of Beach residents leased or bought their land from the community of Karatá and therefore did not represent an indigenous community which possessed special land rights. The contradiction here rested in the fact that the rights of the community of Karatá were based on the very Harrison-Altamirano Treaty that he flatly rejected as inapplicable. He stated:

This is a difficult problem . . . very difficult because many years and many governments have gone by and an adequate solution has never
been given to this problem. We hope that with our presence [the national directorate of the Port Authority] . . . we are sure that we are not going to solve the whole problem but we hope our presence will at least begin a regional dialogue so that the central govern-
ment, the local authorities, as well as the very Autonomy Law and the communities can arrive on an integral solution to this prob-
lem—the problem of land ownership. We already were aware of the majority of the information that our friend Carpentier indicated with respect to the history of these lands. We even studied the Harrison-Altamirano Treaty and we looked up the history in order to better understand this problem. We made a series of interviews and we collected documentation etc. in order to solve this problem. It is not necessary to look at the land history nor even at the Har-
rison-Altamirano Treaty, rather more contemporaneously we as a corporation claim to be the owners of these lands. What I have with me is a map, a groundplot . . . where it indicates in accordance with the land documents which are duly registered in Bluefields, which is where this kind of property is registered, that this is a polygon here [pointing to the map] that clearly belongs to the Port Author-
ity. . . . According to the people we have interviewed, all say that they have negotiated with the community of Karawala [sic] partic-
ularly with Mr. Chico Francis. . . . So then what is the reality as such of these lands? More than 90 percent of them have been taken. Some [residents] argue that the lands have been given to them by City Hall, others claim that they have been given by the Port Authority, but the great majority indicate that they have bought or leased the land by the community of Karatá. So in this sense I would correct a bit of what Carpentier said about Karatá . . . only until recently has a conflict emerged in the Beach. The people with which at different moments we [the Port Authority] have had a relation-
ship has been the community of Karatá. . . . But if you speak with the people around the Cayuco [a bar located in The Beach] they show you documents given by the community of Karatá.19

This speech revealed a number of telling contradictions and ambiva-
lent attitudes with regard to Indian land claims expressed by a Pacific Nicaraguan government official. Martinez indicated that appeals to
turn-of-the-century history were not legally valid in this case because the Port Authority possessed relatively recent legally binding documents, all of which had been generated after 1980 as a result of the confusion brought about by the rapid flight of foreign companies and Somocista government officials. Yet he admitted that the Port Authority had continued to honor Karatá land claims. He recognized this policy without mentioning the fact that Karatá land claims were originally based on the Harrison-Altamirano Treaty, whose relevance he had just denied. Martinez refused to accept the argument that The Beach constituted an indigenous community because he felt that their status as Indians was contradicted by their traditional role as paying tenants on lands claimed by Karatá Indians. Here Martinez mistakenly presumed that Miskito Indian land rights were held by Miskito Indians as a general class of people rather than as inhabitants of specific communities that had formally acquired title to their land at the turn of the century, as was actually the case. This perspective betrayed his unawareness or indifference with regard to the established indigenous land tenure system in the city in which all persons, including non-Karatá Miskito, whose houses lie on land claimed by Karatá must make lease payments to the community of Karatá. He also refused to accept The Beach’s bid, which he acknowledged had only recently emerged, to be able to act as both a communal and indigenous collective entity.

In an interview that I conducted with Carpentier later that week, he explained in greater detail the arguments that he and the community were asserting. He recounted to me an interesting variant of the Puerto Cabezas founding myth. According to him, what is now Puerto Cabezas used to be called “Bilwi—Mosquitia.” Originally Bilwi comprised three, not one, Miskito communities. The one that was led by Noah Columbus occupied the area where El Cocal now finds itself. The other was called Mule Town and occupied the area that is now known as Barrio San Luis. The Beach was the third community and a man called Casanova led it. He claimed that he had formerly possessed documentation that proved this, but that the Sandinistas had confiscated and destroyed these documents during the civil war.

In general, residents of The Beach appreciated and realized the necessity of the efforts made on their behalf by YATAMA, but manifested rather different arguments as to the legitimacy of their claim to
the disputed land. Many confirmed the claim that the original inhabitant of the neighborhood was named Casanova but acknowledged that they were not accustomed to referring to the neighborhood as an “indigenous community.”

In an interview that I conducted with Ronald Villareal, one of the leaders of the seventeen families, he denied the centrality the arguments made by YATAMA. He regarded these as obscure and trivial historical arguments. This is not to say that he denied their validity; rather, he simply did not accept the current relevance of an old and, most importantly, complicated history. For him, there existed two principal reasons that he and his neighbors should have access to the land. First, the Port Authority did not currently use the land in question; and second, the land belonged to the neighborhood by virtue of its proximity—only a dirt road leading down to the pier separated The Beach from the disputed land.

Villareal resented what he perceived as the Port Authority’s indifference with regard to the welfare and rights of the neighborhood. Here he cited among other grievances the Port Authority’s refusal to consult the residents of The Beach before making decisions about the disputed land. This refusal had most recently manifested itself in the case of the fish-processing plant. He also complained that the Port Authority rarely hired Beach People on the docks and made no attempt to improve the infrastructure of the neighborhood. For him, this indifference was typical of the relationship between the “poor people” of The Beach and the “rich people” that run the “companies” and “governments.” In this relationship, Beach People find themselves powerless and easily victimized. He stated, clearly with the current struggle in mind, that rich people “can always pay someone to draw up a map but poor people can’t.” The majority of the members of the seventeen families with whom I spoke shared Villareal’s disappointment and indignation, and also expressed a great deal of pessimism with regard to their ability as poor Beach People to openly confront the authorities in the city. They did, however, take heart in the fact that they were united, armed, and willing to fight.

Ultimately, what lay at the core of Villareal and his neighbors’ claim to the land was the notion that they as poor inhabitants of The Beach had been neglected by the government and the Port Authority,
and therefore had no obligation to respect the authority of these institutions. The land history of Bilwi was in this context only important in the sense that it was complicated and obscure enough to question the validity of the claims of any party. Throughout the confrontation between the police and the seventeen families, it became very apparent that the neighborhood came to represent the most important communal identification around which collective action was mobilized. The families asserted their right to build homes as Beach families. They did not assert their rights as Nicaraguan families or as Porteño families. Their defense of their rights was thus clearly phrased and conceived in terms of communal rights as a neighborhood within a city. From this point, claiming indigenous communal identity was a step that could easily follow.

This case illustrates the complex ways in which ideologies of race and culture intersect with regional and class-based divisions. Contrary to many of the accounts of the region by journalists and social scientists, the so-called ethnic groups of the region are not monolithic entities, nor do they reflect fixed and unalterable identities. In this sense, it is important to heed Charles Hale’s call to problematize the increasingly popular concept of identity (Hale 1997, 571). The categorical distinction between Creole and Miskito is part of a wider vocabulary through which Porteños understand and act upon their social world. In the practice of acting upon that world, Porteños in turn rework and transform these categories.

The case of the land conflict in The Beach also speaks to the disutility of interpreting the self-conscious assertion of identity as a phenomenon that can only be understood from the perspective of the so-called ethnic group (Smith 1996). If viewed in isolation, the fact that residents of The Beach, a neighborhood mainly composed of English-speakers who trace at least part of their origin to the West Indies (particularly Jamaica and the Cayman Islands), should claim indigenous identity in the context of a land dispute might lead one to question the authenticity of such a claim. Indeed, many people in Puerto Cabezas did question the motives of Beach families in this case. On the other hand, to view this case as the organic reemergence of a latent indigenous identity by authentic Indians would be equally problematic. In actuality it was through their participation in the land conflict that Beach
residents actively asserted and simultaneously reevaluated the nature of their communal ties. Identity in Puerto Cabezas must be understood within contexts in which individuals and other social actors challenge and transform social categories in practice.

**Linguistic Ideology and Official Ethnicity in the RAAN**

The practice of ethnic and racial identification in Puerto Cabezas also must be understood in the context of official attempts by the Nicaraguan government to create ethnic policy. In 1987 the Nicaraguan government, in an attempt to address the long-standing problem of political, economic, and social discord between the eastern and western halves of the country, approved the Statute of Regional Autonomy, which created a legal and legislative basis for a limited amount of political decentralization within the Nicaraguan polity. The Autonomy Statute replaced the former Atlantic Coast department of Zelaya with two new administrative units (known as autonomous regions), RAAN and RAAS, and it also chartered the formation of elected legislative bodies in each region.  

Although generally welcomed by Costeño political leaders, the statute has been criticized for its lack of clarity with regard to the juridical and administrative relationship between the autonomous regions and the national government. After the election of 1990, in which the first representatives to the regional assemblies were elected, Costeños on both the left and right questioned the national government’s commitment to respecting the spirit of the Autonomy Statute. The implementation (*la reglamentación*) of the Autonomy Statute has since that time emerged as the single most important political project in the region, as regional leaders have universally recognized that in its current form the statute lacks the capability to provide for anything more than a token autonomy. Although completely lacking in muscle with regard to political and economic matters, the statute makes, according to many Costeño leaders, important and novel provisions with regard to cultural matters.

The Autonomy Statute, rather than delineating the duties, rights, and powers of the regional government with respect to the national government, devotes itself primarily to recognizing the social heterogeneity of the region and guaranteeing inhabitants the right to maintain
their distinctiveness on an individual and communal level. In order to identify and define the nature of this social heterogeneity, the statute uses a set of terms, and the underlying assumptions on which these terms are based, which taken together form what I call “official ethnicity.” Key concepts within official ethnicity include culture, identity, ethnic identity, and ethnic group (cultura, identidad, identidad étnica, y étnia in Spanish). The specific nature of the official recognition and use of these terms represents a new development in the relationship between the Central American national governments and the indigenous and minority groups that inhabit these countries. Official ethnicity is based on a specific kind of analysis of the social diversity in the region—an analysis whose introduction has been relatively recent and is in many ways at odds with Costeño ways of understanding and characterizing this diversity.

The Autonomy Statute guarantees the right of all inhabitants of the autonomous regions to “preserve and develop their languages, religions and cultures” (for the full text see Anuario Indigenista 1987, 106–117). The statute explicitly protects the ethnic and cultural rights of the inhabitants of the Atlantic Coast—rights that have not explicitly been extended to the rest of the nation’s population. The high concentration of so-called ethnic communities (comunidades étnicas) in the Atlantic Coast is the demographic feature that clearly motivated the government’s decisions to extend these special rights to Costeños (CAPRI 1992, 230).

The implicit assumption behind enacting such legislation in the Atlantic region as opposed to the Pacific region is that, in contrast to Nicaraguans from the Pacific Coast, Costeño groups were viewed to manifest a culture and ethnic identity that warranted specific governmental consideration. The social variation within the Pacific Coast was not recognized as ethnic or cultural because the common presumption within Nicaragua is that the Pacific Coast does not contain significant indigenous populations or ethnic communities. This perspective reflects what Gould (referring to the Pacific Coast) calls the “myth of a Mestizo Nicaragua,” which he defines as “a collective belief that Nicaragua has been an ethnically homogenous society since the nineteenth century” (Gould 1993a, 394). The myth of mestizaje (in which Nicaraguans emphasize the mixed, neither solely Indian nor solely European, nature
of the nation) represents an official discourse that has penetrated in one form or another all levels of Nicaraguan society.

The text of the Autonomy Statute lays out what amounts to a demographic analysis of the population of the Atlantic Coast region, an analysis that operates under the assumptions of official ethnicity. The statute declares that, given that distinct ethnic communities populate the Atlantic Coast, Nicaragua must be considered a “multi-ethnic, pluricultural and multi-lingual” country. In contrast to the Pacific region, each inhabitant of the Atlantic is associated with one of the so-called ethnic groups identified in the statute. Article II of the document states:

The Atlantic region of Nicaragua constitutes approximately 50 percent of the territorial patrimony of the nation and close to three hundred thousand inhabitants, representing 9.5 percent of the national population, which are distributed in: one hundred eighty-two thousand Mestizos who speak Spanish; seventy-five thousand Misquitos who speak their own language and twenty-six thousand Creoles who speak English; one thousand seven hundred Garífonas the majority of which have lost their language and eight hundred fifty Ramas of which only thirty-five conserve their language. (CAPRI 1992, 229)

The most striking feature of the classificatory system elaborated in the statute is its comprehensiveness. That is to say, the statute implicitly identifies a single genus or category (ethnicity) containing species or headings (e.g. Miskito, Creole, etc.) with which each and every Costeño can be exclusively associated. Thus, official ethnicity submits ethnicity not just as a limited classificatory scheme, such as, for example, occupation (a category that is not expected to manifest itself in every member of a society), but rather as an all-encompassing system such as gender, which is applied to all people. The official ethnicity as manifested in the Autonomy Statute confidently asserts its own universal applicability.

Not only does the statute correlate every Costeño with one of the mentioned ethnic groups, it also associates each ethnic group with a particular language (Mestizo, Spanish; Creole, English; Miskito, Miskitu). The European-derived languages are referred to by name in the text, while each indigenous language is referred to as the possession of the ethnic group to which it presumably pertains. This way of
referring to the languages of the region, far from trivial, betrays a significant feature of official and unofficial linguistic ideologies. Pacific Nicaraguans in general manifest a clear ideological distinction between European language and indigenous languages, the former being considered intrinsically superior. It is a common practice, even in the Atlantic Coast, for Spanish and English speakers to refer to Miskitu and Sumu as “dialects” within an ideological framework that ranks languages vs. dialects on a superior-inferior scale. In contrast to speakers of European languages, speakers of indigenous languages are viewed to have a proprietary relationship with these languages as ethnic groups. The statute tacitly postulates an inextricable link between a specific ethnic population and a specific indigenous language. Thus the Miskito, Sumu, and Garífonas possess “their language” (“su lengua”).

I found that Porteños frequently engage, often vehemently, in debates as to whether Miskitu is a language or dialect. Many Porteños refuse to grant Miskitu status as a language and instead disparage it as only a dialect. The negative associations that are attached to indigenous “dialects” do not go uncontested, however. Particularly in postwar Puerto Cabezas, Miskitu is witnessing something of a linguistic renaissance. Many of my Miskitu-speaking informants confessed to me that in the past they had been ashamed to speak Miskitu, especially when they found themselves in Managua. Now Miskitu is defiantly spoken in official places, where in the past its use had been considered inappropriate. For example, in the offices of the municipal government of Puerto Cabezas, only Miskitu can be heard. The current mayor of the city, elected in 2004, is Elizabeth Enrique, a Miskito woman from the YATAMA party. Miskitu leaders, all of whom speak Spanish and English, now insist on speaking Miskitu for at least part of their public appearances in places such as schools and sporting events.

Some Miskitu speakers attempt to counter the claim to the superiority of the English language by criticizing Mosquito Coast English as “inglis sauna” (bad English). A number of my Porteño informants, defensive of the negative characterizations of Miskitu by English-speakers, disparagingly referred to “cas inglis” (“coast English” in Miskitu) as “plas untara” (from the banana plantation). In order to learn Miskitu in Puerto Cabezas, I frequently exchanged conversation practice in Miskitu for conversation practice in English. Many of my Miskitu
teachers/informants expressed their enthusiasm about learning “ inglés pain” (good English), which they perceived as being far superior to the Mosquito Coast English that many of them spoke to varying degrees.

On the surface, these linguistic ideologies could be interpreted as indications of the deeply rooted ethnic divisions between Creoles and Miskitos that are presumed to exist in the region. For example, the derision of Mosquito Coast English by Miskitu speakers in response to the claim to superiority of European languages (Spanish and English) over Indian languages might be interpreted as an illustration of ethnic rivalry. In this ethnic rivalry, each group would be perceived to have its own distinct cultural expressions that it defends against the foreign cultural expressions of another group. This sort of interpretation would certainly be consistent with the perspectives that are prominent in journalism and scholarship, as well as the official stances of the Nicaraguan government.

However, it is important to note that non-Miskitu-speaking English speakers also express very ambivalent attitudes about the alleged quality of their English. During fieldwork in Puerto Cabezas, I noticed that some English-speakers were reticent to speak English with me and preferred to speak Spanish with me in one-on-one settings. When I asked about this, they explained that their English was hard for North Americans to understand and that it was “bad English.” These people were usually younger English speakers who had less access to the traditional sources of knowledge of North American English (e.g., the Moravian Church and US companies). Older Porteños, in contrast, often relished the opportunity to converse in “good English” (some Porteños even defined good English as “the Queen’s English”) with a person from the United States. They took pride in their ability to speak both good English and Mosquito Coast English.

In Puerto Cabezas in the 1990s, the primary source of good English was the Moravian Church, where church services in the so-called Creole Church are held in an idiom that more closely approximates North American English. In fact, one of my young informants told me that she preferred to attend Moravian services at the Beach church, which conducted services in Miskitu, because she could not read English and she did not understand much of the English spoken in the Creole Church. Although she insisted that she spoke “Coast
English” better than Miskitu, she said that reading Miskitu was easier for her than reading English.

In the face of the perceived threat to Creole power in the city in the postwar period, the issue of the nature of the differences between Creole and Miskito has become highly politicized. This has resulted in the attempt by leaders and non-leaders alike to consciously remove perceived mutual influences from their language and culture. This push towards purification, however, stands in the face of the long-standing value of cosmopolitanism that has predominated in the region.

English speakers who identify themselves as Creoles often deny or downplay their command of Miskitu. The act of denying speaking Miskitu was interpreted as an assertion of social status on the part of such a person. So, for example, among a multiethnic, multilingual group of friends that I spent time with, Lutz (a self-proclaimed Creole) was chided for being “fachente” (conceited in English and Spanish) for claiming that he did not speak Miskitu. Many Creoles admitted to picking up some Miskitu “in the street” but denied any real fluency. This denial of Miskitu fluency and refusal to speak Miskitu can be interpreted as a manifestation of “second order indexicality” in which the linguistic performance of speakers serves primarily as a way of marking social identity rather than simply communicating information (Graham 2002, 203).

Among Miskitu speakers, I frequently came across the conscious rejection of English loan words that were perceived to be nonnative to Miskitu. From a philological point of view, such a rejection is a very tricky proposition in light of the deep interpenetration of Miskitu and English due to the historical alliance between the British and the Miskito that was a precondition for the expansion of the Miskitu language in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Nevertheless, I witnessed the impulse among Miskitu speakers to purify Miskitu of English influence.

During interviews with Miskito political leaders, I noticed that it had become a common practice when dealing with outsiders (particularly so-called internacionalistas such as myself) for party leaders to conduct the interview in Miskitu with Spanish translation, despite the fact that all Miskito leaders in Puerto Cabezas were fluent in Spanish. This practice, also a kind of linguistic indexicality, has become common among indigenous leaders in Latin America as a way of establishing their
authority as indigenous leaders and performing difference (see Graham 2002).

I often surprised my informants with my ability to speak Miskitu that steadily increased as my fieldwork progressed. This was always a pleasant surprise for my interviewees, who typically spoke with foreign researchers and journalists who were making brief visits to the region and did not speak Miskitu. They were flattered that an English-speaking North American would take the time to learn the language, and they would often shift the tone of the interaction away from formal and dramatic to informal and pedantic. They would evaluate my abilities, question me about how I went about learning Miskitu, and educate me about the subtleties and varieties of Miskitu.

On many occasions I was corrected for using terms that my informants stated were truly English. For example, it is the norm in the Miskitu of Puerto Cabezas to seamlessly use the words “want” and “like” without marking them as loan words. So “Plun [food] piaia [to eat] want [want] sna [I am]” means “I want to eat food.” I was informed, however, that the true Miskitu way to express this idea of wanting was to use “brih ai duakata”—a more cumbersome term that I found was used infrequently.

In general, Miskito leaders and others lamented what they perceived as the heightening contamination of the language that had been precipitated by the Miskitu displacement from the Wangki River (the ideological core of Miskito culture and language) to the English-speaking and Creole city of Puerto Cabezas. Although Miskitu had been spoken continuously in the city since well before its foundation as Puerto Cabezas in the 1920s, it was commonly believed that the varieties of Miskitu spoken along the Wangki River were the pure representatives of the language that had resisted the English influences of city life.

I also spent time attending rehearsals and performances of a Miskitu dance group that was headed by the sister of a major Miskito political leader. In one of my conversations with her, she suggested that I should not use the term “dans pulaia” to describe what they do, given that “dance” is an English loan word. She explained that they simply practice “pulaia,” a word that means play. Her group performed in tuno (pounded bark) outfits, the official traditional fabric of the Miskito, and as a director she was actively interested in trying to present authentic
Miskito culture. With regard to the style of dance, she instructed her dancers that to dance as a Miskito was to dance in truncated hopping motions (she used the Spanish term *brinadito*). She distinguished the brinadito style from what she called the Black style of dancing, which used the hips and was sexually suggestive. This distinction was in line with the common belief in Afro-Caribbean hypersexuality, as well as a broader Latin American belief in the moral purity of Indians in contrast to non-Indians.

Continuing with the issue of language, linguistic ideology, and cultural purity, the case of the Rama Indians is revealing on the same score. According to the Autonomy Statute, the Ramas are a group that has all but lost their language. According to the historical and anthropological work done in the region, the inhabitants of Rama Key (a small island in Bluefields Bay) and its surroundings have to different degrees spoken both Rama and Mosquito Coast English since the colonial period. Researchers speculate that the geographical territory of the Rama language has shrunk drastically from the seventeenth century to the present, having been replaced by both Miskitu and English (Craig 1992; Salamanca 1993). Historically speaking, Creole and Rama ethnic identities have not been mutually exclusive, nor have they been plainly linked to the English or Rama language. The boundary between a Rama Indian and a Creole, when these identifiers have been used at all, has always been porous.

Historically, there exist many examples of people with strong familial ties to the inhabitants of the Rama Keys who used a Creole label and the English language in their political dealings with Britain and the Mosquito Government (see Hale 1987a). Yet according to the reasoning of the Autonomy Statute, a Rama Indian who no longer speaks English (in favor of Spanish for example) would be not be considered to have lost their language because Rama identity is rigidly defined as being linked to the Rama language, not English.

In practice the assumptions of the official ethnicity of the Autonomy Statute come into conflict with systems of racial categorization that exist among people. The case of the Mestizo provides an example of such dissonance between official and popular racial vocabularies. Generally, in Latin America the word “Mestizo” refers to a person of mixed race. In the Pacific regions of Nicaragua, “Mestizo” functions as an
intermediate category in a system of racial classification in which Indian and European occupy opposite poles. As mentioned earlier, the Nicaraguan “myth of mestizaje” claims that Nicaragua’s population is dominated by Mestizos.

Nevertheless the word “Mestizo” in both the Pacific region as well as the Atlantic region is not a commonly used term for self-identification. In the Pacific region, rural Nicaraguans (more than half of the population) predominantly identify themselves as campesinos (peasants) in order to distinguish themselves from city dwellers. In terms of racial terminology, Nicaraguans most commonly situate themselves within a skin-color spectrum (dark-skinned to light-skinned, *moreno* to *claro* or *blanco*) rather than in terms of a racial continuum (Indian to European).

In the Atlantic Coast, the word “Mestizo” functions differently. In this region it not only refers to a presumed mixed ancestry but also to one’s presumed place of origin. This is to say that in the Atlantic Coast, a Mestizo is a person who is considered to have come, at some indeterminate point in history, from the Pacific part of country. Thus, within the system of racial classification in the Atlantic Coast, Mestizo carries a strong geographical component in addition to the strictly racial one. It is telling that a person of mixed Miskito and Creole/Black ancestry is not considered a Mestizo despite the fact that they are of undeniably mixed ancestry. When the Autonomy Statute speaks of “one hundred eighty-two thousand Mestizos” who inhabit the region, it is not referring to all those people who are considered to be of mixed race. Rather, it refers to those people who in some sense are not considered to be native to the region. The Mestizo category of the Autonomy Statute corresponds to a set of commonly used Costeño terms that refer to people from the Pacific.

Using a telling anachronism that dramatizes the deeply rooted divisions established by European colonialism between the Atlantic and Pacific regions, Creole English refers to Pacific Nicaraguans and Pacific Coast Central Americans in general as “Spaniards” and “Spanish,” while Miskitu uses an equivalent term, *ispail*. When Spanish speakers in the Atlantic coast want to distinguish themselves from the Miskito or Creole, they rarely use the term “Mestizo”; rather, they affirm that they or their family, at some real or mythical point in time, was “del Pacífico” (from the Pacífic). I found that it was very common for Spanish-speakers
born in the region to identify themselves as being “del Pacífico” and later feel obligated to clarify that they were born in the Atlantic Coast: “Yo soy del Pacífico . . . bueno yo nací aquí pero mi familia es del lado del Pacífico.” (“I am from the Pacific . . . well, I was born here but my family is from the Pacific side.”) Thus, a term that has an ostensibly geographical referent functions within nominally racial- or color-based vocabularies of social differentiation.

The classificatory scheme of the Autonomy Statute eliminates the disharmonic term “del Pacífico.” It substitutes “Mestizo,” a term with a clear racial referent but which is rarely used in the daily life of Costeños, for “del Pacífico” or “Español” (Spaniard) Within the popular Costeño classificatory system, to assert that one is “del Pacífico” is a way of resisting identification as a Creole or Miskito. In this sense it is a negative or leftover category that functions as a distancing mechanism from the positive or better established terms of Miskito and Creole. Yet the Autonomy Statute recognizes its official substitute, Mestizo, as an ethnic group, which can be identified according to the same kind of characteristics as the other ethnic groups of the region.

What, then, does this imply about the principles of official ethnicity as embodied in the Autonomy Statute? What kind of social grouping does the official ethnicity presume an ethnic group to be? In addition to the identification of an ethnic group with its native language, the statute presumes that each “ethnic group” can be identified and defined according to its particular “culture,” “traditions,” “values,” “art,” “social organizations,” and “communal, collective and individual property standards.”

In addition to language, these are the supposedly objective criteria that distinguish one group from another. The Autonomy Statute assumes that the Mestizo category indexes an ethnic group in the same sense as other ethnic groups of the region. The ethnic discourse thus necessarily defines all ethnic groups as being inherently parallel, self-evident, social formations. Thus, according to the Autonomy Statute, the ethnic group is the product of a set of presumably objective characteristics, all regarded as being, in one way or another, cultural.