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Conjuring Territory: Afro-Indigenous Authority and Settler Capitalism in Nicaragua

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Conjuring Territory:

Afro-Indigenous Authority and Settler Capitalism

in Nicaragua

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Anthropology

by

Joshua Lee Mayer

2023

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Conjuring Territory:

Afro-Indigenous Authority and Settler Capitalism

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Doctor of Philosophy in Anthropology

University of California, Los Angeles, 2023

Professor Shannon E. Speed, Chair

This dissertation, based on 20 months of activist fieldwork, is an ethnographic examination of Afro-Indigenous peoples' struggle to *conjure territory*—that is, to convert the legal recognition of territorial rights into a social reality. In 2009, the Indigenous Rama and Afrodescendant Kriol peoples in southeastern Nicaragua received a joint title to roughly 4,000 km^2 of land and 4,000 km^2 of sea. Since then, they have faced dispossession and displacement at the hands of land speculators, cattle ranchers, gold miners, and state-supported megaprojects. As community members grapple with the failure of the law itself to generate freedom from dispossession, the dissertation demonstrates that they are confronting fractally recursive colonialism: a form of colonialism at one scale that reproduces another form of domination at a different scale. Specifically, the violent, extractive relation of United States imperialism toward

Nicaragua is reproduced within Nicaragua as mestizo settler colonialism toward Afro-Indigenous peoples. Over the past century, Global North actors have forcibly indebted the Nicaraguan state, resulting in current debts to multilateral and private lenders. Paying these debts requires constant growth in exports to bring in U.S. dollars. The state meets these obligations by promoting mining, cattle ranching, and infrastructure projects that depend on the settler colonization of Afro-Indigenous lands.

After conceptualizing fractally recursive colonialism, the dissertation moves on to an ethnographic account of Rama-Kriol political thought and action. Starting from oral histories in two Rama and Kriol communities, the dissertation examines the historical roots of Rama-Kriol political thought on territory and freedom, attending especially to concepts of territorial care. The dissertation then narrates Rama and Kriol communities' efforts to contest dispossession through an array of strategies, including lawsuits, vigilance, outright refusal of state and settler authority, cooperation with government officials and settlers, and appeals to international authorities. Through political and economic entanglements with state and international institutions, the communities are generating jurisdiction within their territory—a key building block for sovereignty. The conclusion reflects on the enormous stakes of the Rama and Kriol communities' work to get free and—alongside similar communities around the world—to create a livable future on this planet.

The dissertation of Joshua Lee Mayer is approved.

Hannah C. Appel

Jessica R. Cattelino

Jennifer Goett

Jemima Pierre

Shannon E. Speed, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2023

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

ARDE: Democratic Revolutionary Alliance (Alianza Revolucionaria Democrática)

CABEI: Central American Bank of Economic Integration

FAO: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

FCPF: Forest Carbon Partnership Facility

FSLN: Sandinista National Liberation Front (Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional)

GCF: Green Climate Fund

GTR-K: Rama-Kriol Territorial Government (Gobierno Territorial Rama y Kriol)

HKND: Hong Kong Nicaragua Canal Development Company

IACHR: Inter-American Commission on Human Rights

IDB: Inter-American Development Bank

IFI: International financial institution

ILO: International Labour Organization

IMF: International Monetary Fund

MARENA: Ministry of the Environment and Natural Resources (Ministerio del Ambiente y los Recursos Naturales)

MISURASATA: Miskitu, Sumu, Rama, Sandinista United (Miskitu, Sumu, Rama, Sandinista Asla Takanka)

RACCS: South Caribbean Coast Autonomous Region (Región Autónoma de la Costa Caribe Sur)

REDD(+): Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (Plus)

SI-A-PAZ: International System of Protected Areas for Peace (Sistema Internacional de Áreas Protegidas para la Paz)

UNDRIP: United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

UNHCR: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

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This dissertation is the product of extraordinary generosity, friendship, solidarity, and love. While I name certain individuals below, I have undoubtedly left many out who have invested in and shaped this project and my scholarly career, including many in Nicaragua who cannot be named for safety reasons.

I first had my eyes pried open in Nicaragua as an Amherst College undergraduate with extraordinary guidance from the brilliant staff, instructors, and other affiliates of SIT Nicaragua. I never would have ended up in Nicaragua if it were not for the encouragement of Javier Corrales, Ilan Stavans, and Janna Behrens at Amherst College. Denise Gagnon and Suzanne Spencer gave me extraordinary support in the application for the Fulbright fellowship and internal awards. As I returned from my first time in Nicaragua, many faculty helped me work through my next steps, including Amrita Basu, J. Celso Castro Alves, Jenny Kallick, Pavel Machala, Andrew Poe, and Don Robinson.

In my time working in Bluefields as a Fulbright fellow, I had my first introduction to the Rama-Kriol Territory. I was beyond fortunate to receive the mentorship of leaders and community members in the Rama-Kriol Territory and the Black Creole Indigenous Community of Bluefields. I also benefited from the guidance, solidarity, and friendship of an incredible array of Bluefields residents from the elsewhere in Nicaragua and around the world. One day I will be able to acknowledge you more fully, but for now, you know who you are.

After returning to the U.S., I received critical guidance and support from faculty, graduate students, and staff at the University of Chicago, including Shannon Lee Dawdy, Pranathi Diwakar, E. G. Enbar, Elina Hartikainen, Juan Fernando Ibarra del Cueto, Francis Mckay, and my advisor, John D. Kelly.

I am completely overwhelmed by the generous and enthusiastic support I have had since I began working with the Indian River and Greytown communities five years ago. While all errors in this dissertation are my own, this project is the result of the interest, intellectual and physical labor, and friendship of people in the communities and in San Juan de Nicaragua who cannot be named at this time.

My work has also benefitted from friendships and professional relationships in the Nicaraguan academic and legal communities. María Luisa Acosta took me under her wing in 2014 and has continuously shaped my thinking on Nicaraguan laws. Lottie Cunningham has been a constant inspiration; it has been an honor to get to join her in the trenches these past few years. Members of the brilliant intellectual community at the Universidad Centroamericana gave me the opportunity to conduct archival research and served as generous interlocutors when I presented my work at critical junctures in the development of this dissertation.

In my years at UCLA, I have had the good fortune to be in conversation with an extraordinary group of faculty, staff, and graduate and undergraduate students who have shaped this project as my instructors, colleagues, comrades, and students. Shannon Speed, Jessica Cattelino, Jemima Pierre, Hannah Appel, and Jennifer Goett (from afar) have been supportive supervisors through the challenges of a doctorate in the COVID era. Karida Brown, Jennifer Chun, Kamari Clarke, Susanna Hecht, and Grace Kyungwon Hong have been influential instructors and interlocutors. Jennifer Banawa, Tracy Humbert, Tyler Lawrence, and Ann Walter worked ridiculously hard to make my research and degree progress possible as department staff. I have also been fortunate to be in conversation with an extraordinary group of peers about this project, including Akua Agyen, Megan Baker, Bradley Cardozo, Spencer Chen, Mercedes Douglass, Viki Eagle, Ulises Espinoza, Aditi Halbe, Joelle Julien, Sucharita Kanjilal, Kelsey

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Jennifer Goett provided me with contacts to begin my work in the Rama-Kriol Territory, introduced me to activist methods, and constantly gave me guidance and early opportunities to develop as an anthropologist (including long before I knew I would go into anthropology). Shannon Speed and Jessica Cattelino at UCLA believed in my project from the start and, beyond serving as my dissertation committee chair and member, respectively, have shown me how to be a responsible and generous scholar. I hope to pay forward the mentorship all of you gave me.

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Each of the chapters in this dissertation has been a collective project, and I would like to acknowledge a few individuals and entities by name who had an especially large impact on early drafts of each chapter. Much of the material on territory and sovereignty in the introduction developed out of a library research project under the mentorship of Jessica Cattelino and with the support of a UCLA Graduate Research Mentorship award. A version of Chapter 1 appeared as "Conceptualizing Settler Colonialism in Nicaragua" in *Urban Anthropology* and *Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development*, volume 49, no. 3–4 (2021). I wish to acknowledge, appreciate, and remember the late publisher of that journal, Jack R. Rollwagen (1935–2021), who shepherded this long article to publication several months before his passing. Shannon Lee Dawdy, Zach Mondesire, and Jemima Pierre provided thoughtful comments on

portions of the chapter. The second chapter emerged in conversation with Kamari Clarke and Joelle Julien and benefitted from our conversations on scale and the global in anthropology. It also received especially helpful comments from Bruno Anaya Ortiz and Mihaela Serban at the New Directions in Law and Society workshop hosted by the University of Massachusetts Amherst's Center for Justice, Law, and Societies. Chapter 3 is co-authored with four co-researchers selected by the Rama and Kriol communities. The co-authors' contributions to the interviews and analysis were indispensable. Logistical support—and informal research support—came from many other community members. I am grateful to Teresa Barnett and the UCLA Library Center for Oral History Research for the training they offered in oral history methods. Chapter 4 is a revised and updated version of a previously published chapter and appears here with permission from Lexington Books: Joshua L. Mayer, "Negotiating Consultation: The Duty to Consult and Contestation of Autonomy in Nicaragua's Rama-Kriol Territory," in *Indigenous Struggles for Autonomy: The Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua,* edited by Luciano Baracco (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2019, all rights reserved). That chapter, in turn, was revised from my master's thesis. I especially appreciate Megan Baker, Luciano Baracco, Jessica Cattelino, John D. Kelly, Jemima Pierre, and Shannon Speed for providing thoughtful comments on drafts of the thesis and book chapter. I have had the good fortune to workshop Chapter 5 in multiple settings over the past two years. It has particularly benefitted from comments from Hannah Appel, Luciana Chamorro, Jennifer Chun, Eveline Dürr, Sonya Rao, and Shannon Speed. This dissertation would not have been possible without the support of all those named above, but all errors are my mine alone.

Finally, I want to acknowledge the people who have endured this dissertation alongside me. First, there are the friends who have accompanied me, motivated me, comforted me, and

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Finally, I want to acknowledge that I can never sufficiently acknowledge my brilliant partner in all aspects of this life. Addison Dickens, this dissertation is a product of your support, companionship, critical lens, comradery, and love. Thank you.

PREFACE

אַזוי האָט גאָט געזאָגט :טוט רעכט און גערעכטיקייט ,און זײַט מציל דעם באַגזלטן פֿון דעם דריקערס האַנט ;און אַ פֿרעמדן ,אַן יתום ,און אַן אַלמנה ,זאָלט איר ניט קריוודען ,ניט באַרויבן ,און אומשולדיק בלוט זאָלט איר ניט פֿאַרגיסן אין דעם דאָזיקן אָרט

און זוכט דעם פֿריד פֿון דער שטאָט וואָס איך האָב אײַך פֿאַרטריבן אַהין ,און זײַט מתפלל פֿאַר איר צו גאָט ,וואָרום אין איר פֿריד וועט זײַן פֿריד צו אײַך

Thus said the LORD: Do what is just and right; rescue from the defrauder him who is robbed; do not wrong the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow; commit no lawless act, and do not shed the blood of the innocent in this place.

And seek the welfare of the city to which I have exiled you and pray to the LORD in its behalf; for in its prosperity you shall prosper.

—Jeremiah 22:3, 29:7 (Yehoyesh's Yiddish Tanakh; JPS 1985)

During my dissertation proposal defense in October 2019, Jemima Pierre asked me a simple question for which I had not prepared: What drives you to do this research? After sitting silently for a few moments, I offered an incomplete answer: The work that the Indigenous Rama and Afrodescendant Kriol peoples are doing to defend and re-establish their relationships with territory is important not only for them, but for all of humanity to avoid the most catastrophic effects of the climate crisis. That answer was and is a key element of this dissertation and my motivation for carrying out the research. Nevertheless, as a researcher who is not a member of the communities with whom I conduct research, and as a researcher coming from a position of extraordinary privilege, I feel that I now owe a more thorough and thoughtful explanation of my personal motivations for, and the trajectory of, this project. I owe this to the readers of this dissertation to better situate the knowledge I am producing alongside the Rama and Kriol communities, but I especially owe it to Rama and Kriol readers of this dissertation and my other

publications—those reading it before and shortly after its completion and those reading it much further in the future.

The trajectory of this project begins with my consciousness, as a self-appointed family historian, of the role of difference in my ancestors' arrival as settlers in North America. I am a descendant of Ashkenazi Jewish, Irish, Scottish, and French Huguenot and Catholic families who immigrated to the United States, most of them by way of Québec and South Africa. They fled anti-Jewish and anti-Huguenot pogroms, forced conscription, British colonization, and dire economic conditions. They assimilated into dominant settler societies as they traveled, investing in their emergent whiteness (Brodkin 1998; Lipsitz 2018). Growing up as a Jewish kid in western Michigan, I encountered vestiges of incomplete assimilation into normativity—peers who joked about the Holocaust and teachers who penalized me for observing the High Holidays. In retrospect, I see that my early interest in my family's history—my search for stories, names, places, and dates—came from a desire to reconcile the experience of difference, however minor, with the erasures of difference that came along with an investment whiteness. Starting at Amherst College, I studied political science in order to understand how governments manage difference and conflict.

In August 2011, I arrived in Nicaragua for the first time as a college student in the middle of a deeply confusing semester abroad. As an able-bodied, straight, white man raised in an upper-middle-class family in Michigan and attending an elite liberal arts college, I had always understood the poverty and violence of countries like Nicaragua to be, at their root, the result of internal conflicts, corruption, and other inadequacies. Sure, perhaps Ronald Reagan had launched an unjust war back in the 1980s, but Nicaragua had been poor and riddled with violence since long before then. The world order I inhabited had allowed my ancestors to gradually accumulate

intergenerational wealth so that my grandparents and parents could afford post-secondary training as physicians, teachers, and social workers. If such a life was possible for my family in the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust, which killed countless cousins who remained in Europe, could the world's dominant social, political, and economic systems really be structurally unjust?

My months in Nicaragua profoundly changed my analysis of the world. I heard the personal testimonies of those who endured or fought in the Sandinista Revolution and the ensuing Contra War. I learned Nicaraguan history from the people who have lived it, including trained historians like Dora María Téllez. Unlike my ancestors, who had the option to invest in whiteness amid shifting racial formations in the post-World War II moment (Brodkin 1998; Lipsitz 2018), I came to see that Nicaraguans were trapped by United States imperial exploitation. They could not get free because their labor and their resources were the necessary inputs for economic growth in the country in which my family lived. U.S. military and diplomatic interventions in Nicaragua did not seek to remedy dictatorships, war, instability, and poverty; U.S. interventions generated them. If this was the case in Nicaragua, could it then be the case elsewhere in the world? The U.S. invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, which had figured centrally in my early political consciousness, now looked eerily similar to the U.S. military occupation of Nicaragua in the 1910s, '20s, and '30s—perhaps Sadr and Sandino were not so dissimilar.

As I gradually had my eyes opened to U.S. imperialism, my time on Nicaragua's Caribbean coast led me to more intimate analogies. My study abroad program brought me to the regional capital of Bluefields and the Creole town of Pearl Lagoon, and the social complexities of difference and diversity in the region immediately drew me in. Unlike western Nicaragua,

where the myth of complete mestizaje is hegemonic (Gould 1998), the dominant ideas in the country associate the Caribbean coast with exoticized difference from the national majority. In addition to a mestizo majority, the Caribbean coast consists of a mix of Indigenous, Afrodescendant, and Afro-Indigenous peoples who, in spite of centuries of attempts at colonization, continue as distinctive political communities with centuries-long relationships with the places in which they live. Many local leaders of the ruling Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) came from these communities, and they told me and my peers about hard-won laws guaranteeing political autonomy and communal land rights for Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples on the Caribbean coast. State institutions were in the middle of issuing massive, inalienable, communal land titles to Indigenous and Afrodescendant communities, and Nicaraguan law recognized the assembly of all members of each community as the highest authority in the community and its lands. There were challenges, the leaders told us, but the political model was successful at maintaining peace among the peoples of the region. My brain spun with the potential applications of this model for managing differences in the places my ancestors and cousins lived—Québec, South Africa, and perhaps even Israel.

Our visit to the Caribbean coast lasted only a week, but I knew I had to return. For my final month of my semester in Nicaragua, I returned to the Caribbean coast to conduct an independent research project under the mentorship of one of the so-called "Fathers of Autonomy" for the Caribbean coast: the historian and regional FSLN leader Johnny Hodgson. Despite a bout of malaria, I conducted 21 interviews with regional elites and concluded, quoting from their analyses, that there were three primary challenges facing the autonomous political system on the Caribbean coast: a lack of regional consciousness among the populace, a lack of capable leaders from the region, and a dependency on external entities for financial support

(Mayer 2011). Past and present leaders of the regional and municipal governments complained of massive corruption and an outflow of talented workers and leaders to jobs in Managua and abroad. Nevertheless, I concluded on an optimistic note due to the new communal lands regime, arguing, "Demarcation [of communal lands] will strengthen ties within the communities by increasing interdependency and the development of shared interests with respect to natural resources and communal revenues. All of this can generate an autonomous spirit" (Mayer 2011, 31). I felt personally invested in this process and wanted to find a way to contribute to it.

Returning to the U.S., I brought back with me a newfound critical lens toward capitalism and U.S. imperialism. My mentors—especially Andrew Poe—introduced me to a heterodox Marxist analysis via the writings of Latin American liberation theologians, which became the focus of my senior thesis. Celso Castro Alves introduced me to Black, queer, and womanist liberation theologies, which in turn led me to explore Jewish liberation theologies. Reading Marc Ellis (1989; 2002), I came to understand that the Palestinian struggle for liberation is inseparable from the liberation struggles I had come to see first-hand in Nicaragua: the Nicaraguan people's struggle against imperialism and Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples' struggles for autonomy. Jonathan and Daniel Boyarin's (2002) radical analysis of the Jewish state of being in diaspora as a source of anti-nationalist, justice-oriented politics oriented me toward deeply personal sources for my emergent political commitments.

I still felt drawn to return to Nicaragua and did so with a Fulbright student research grant in September 2014. My proposal had been to study Indigenous and Afrodescendant political thought on communal lands during and immediately after the communal land titling process in the Pearl Lagoon Basin, but political events intervened. In July 2014, the Nicaraguan government and a private company with Chinese capital, the Hong Kong Nicaragua Canal

Development Company (HKND), announced that HKND would build an interoceanic canal wider and deeper than the Panama Canal in Nicaragua. Its route would slice through the titled territory of the Rama and Kriol peoples in southeastern Nicaragua, and its Caribbean terminus would displace the Rama community of Bangkukuk Taik. I contacted Jennifer Goett, an anthropologist whose activist ethnographic work with the Kriol community of Monkey Point had included resistance to past canal proposals that would have affected the territory. A month before I left for Nicaragua, she affirmed for me that it would be feasible to shift my project to focus on the conflict between the canal project and the communal land and autonomy systems. She put me in touch with community leaders and the territory's lawyer, María Luisa Acosta.

Over the following ten months, I conducted an institutional ethnography of the Rama-Kriol Territorial Government (GTR-K) as it contended with the canal project (see Chapter 4). I lived in Bluefields, which is both the capital of the South Caribbean Coast Autonomous Region (RACCS) and the seat of the GTR-K. I generally spent my days conducting participant-observation in the GTR-K office: attending meetings, chatting and gossiping with elected leaders and GTR-K staff, and serving as a translator and assistant for communications with international organizations and lawyers. By necessity, I learned to speak Miskito Coast Creole, the English-based creole language spoken in many of the communities. I also conducted interviews and participated in visits to several of the communities, including Bangkukuk Taik, to discuss the canal project.

These months presented me with a more complicated picture of the political system on the Caribbean coast. Whereas my earlier research had pointed me primarily toward internal factors that weakened the autonomy system, the canal project opened my eyes to the similarities between the Rama-Kriol Territory and circumstances of Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples

elsewhere in the world. Since long before the canal project was proposed, the Rama and Kriol peoples faced dispossession at the hands of mestizo settlers from western and central Nicaragua and both foreign and Nicaraguan developers. Still, government officials who I spoke with claimed that they were concerned about this and would seek to address it. Now, with the canal, the Rama and Kriol peoples faced dispossession for a massive infrastructure project that the government itself was promoting in violation of Nicaraguan and international laws. The main problem facing Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples on the Caribbean coast had nothing to do with political consciousness, brain-drain, or dependence; it was a problem of colonization at the hands of a mestizo nationalist state. During my research on the process of approving the canal project, whenever Rama and Kriol people insisted that the state must follow its own laws, state officials would simply claim to comply with the laws while blatantly violating them. Analyzing and writing up my research as a master's student at the University of Chicago, I saw that this was fundamentally a question of sovereignty. When push came to shove, were the Rama and Kriol communities truly able to decide on the fate of their territory, or was the Nicaraguan government able to act on its own? My advisor, John D. Kelly, introduced me to Carl Schmitt's (2005) analysis of sovereignty, which seemed to fit with what I had observed in the Rama-Kriol Territory.

In the end, the canal project has faded away in the absence of funding, but my Fulbright research led me toward new connections and commitments. Seeing how colonization operated in Nicaragua, I was committed to learning more about settler colonialism and Indigenous sovereignty at home. The parallels were obvious; I could not help but see them amid Chicago's protests in solidarity with Standing Rock in the context of resistance to the Dakota Access Pipeline. Still, I found little literature that drew these connections. I found an intellectual home

for this work as a doctoral student at UCLA under the mentorship of Shannon Speed, whose research was drawing exactly these connections across Abya Yala, and of Jessica Cattelino, whose scholarship focused on Native sovereignty.

In the summer of 2018, I returned to Nicaragua for preliminary dissertation research. It was a tense time to be in Nicaragua. In April 2018, a forest fire in the Rama-Kriol Territory and the announcement of government cuts to social security led to mass protests, which were met with lethal violence from the Nicaraguan police and FSLN parapolice forces. Hundreds were killed. I flew into Managua in late June 2018, and the only way to travel to Bluefields was by plane; anti-government protestors had blocked the only land route. The Caribbean coast felt removed from the mass protests and violence seen elsewhere in the country, yet the reminders were there. Ángel Gahona, a prominent journalist in Bluefields whom I used to see at community events, was shot and killed, allegedly by the police.[1] Several leaders in opposition parties were arrested and detained without charges in prisons on the Pacific. Protests did happen in the city while I was there, though they were smaller and were not met with state violence.

During the four months I spent in Nicaragua in 2018, I developed a strange friendship one of the top FSLN political leaders in the region. While I was grabbing a beer with two Kriol leaders I had known for years, this government official walked into the bar and invited us to join him. He asked me about my presence in Bluefields, and we quickly got into a discussion on the nature of U.S. imperialism. From then on, he would refer to me, half-jokingly, as Enemigo de la Humanidad (Enemy of Humanity)—a reference to my country of origin. After our first encounter, I ran into him another time and stumbled into a conversation about the canal. He admitted that the government's handling of the project on the Caribbean coast had been a mess, but he stood by the need for a megaproject. He had served in the FSLN revolutionary

government during the U.S.-backed Contra insurgency of the 1980s and told me he knew intimately what a disaster it would be if the current government again pursued economic policies contrary to U.S. interests. Today's FSLN wants to alleviate poverty while paying sovereign debts and maintaining macroeconomic policies that align with International Monetary Fund (IMF) guidance. In his analysis, only a megaproject with at least partial state ownership could generate revenues of the sort needed to keep up with both commitments.

In that moment, I understood that U.S. imperialism has made the Rama and Kriol struggle in Nicaragua not only parallel to Native struggles in North America, but contingent upon them. Yes, Nicaragua is a settler state pursuing the colonization of Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples' lands; in that way it is comparable to the U.S. and Canadian settler states. Replacing one government with another does nothing to change the structure of settler colonialism in the country. But what happens if we imagine real, material decolonization in Nicaragua? That is, what if we imagine resurgent Indigenous and Afro-Indigenous sovereignty supplanting settler sovereignty throughout Nicaragua? Decolonization is surely incompatible with paying the sovereign debts incurred by the settler state under U.S. military pressure. It is also incompatible with IMF macroeconomic guidance. Paying debts—or even servicing debts—requires constant growth in exports that bring in U.S. dollars, which in turn requires intense extraction and destruction. Without that, decolonization might well be fleeting as the U.S. government and its Global North allies could use their tools of empire to bring down and replace Indigenous and Afrodescendant governments opposed to their financial interests. At best, a more durable decolonization amid the threat of U.S. imperialism would be a decolonization stripped of sovereignty. As Yarimar Bonilla notes elsewhere in the Caribbean, this simply means "postcolonial crises of structural adjustment, NGO shadow states, interventionist

humanitarianism, and the heavy hand of supranational institutions, and foreign governments who might relegate 'ultimate sovereignty' but continue to wield political, economic, and military power" (2013, 163). A *sovereign*, material decolonization in Nicaragua requires the end of imperial domination by North American settler states. In short, Rama and Kriol freedom is deeply connected with the fate of Indigenous struggles for decolonization in North America. This realization is at the core of the political commitments that orient this dissertation.

Also in 2018, I began new ethnographic research that, together with my earlier research at the GTR-K, serves as the data for this dissertation. At the advice of the conservation biologist Christopher Jordan, I traveled that August to the southernmost communities in the Rama-Kriol Territory: the Rama community of Indian River and the Kriol community of Greytown. These communities live in a part of the territory that was, until very recently, little affected by colonial dispossession. Over the past ten years, and especially since 2016, Rama and Kriol community members have noticed a sudden increase in mestizo settlers appropriating and enclosing their lands. In 2018, when I arrived in the town of San Juan de Nicaragua at the southeastern tip of the Rama-Kriol Territory, community leaders were generally aware of my work and were eager to develop a research project that would serve their interests. This dissertation is one product of that work.

As a diasporic Jew, to seek the welfare of the place to which my family has been exiled is to contribute to the struggle against white supremacy, for decolonization, and for a livable planet. This dissertation, and especially the activist research process that led to it, is a component of my efforts toward this end. As a result, the dissertation is by no means a classic work of anthropology. While I have accumulated hundreds of gigabytes of interviews and many notebooks and Word documents of field notes on life in the Rama and Kriol communities, my

aim is not to provide a comprehensive, thick description of Rama and Kriol life. Much of the data I have collected alongside the communities will remain exclusively for the communities' use. Given my positionality, my aim in this dissertation is to use the minimum possible amount of data to advance the work of the Rama and Kriol communities and communicate those portions of their political projects that may bolster anti-colonial movements in other places and times. Otherwise, I embrace a kind of ethnographic refusal (cf. A. Simpson 2014)—informed by my political commitments and positionality as a settler anthropologist—to put these communities on ethnographic display solely for the sake of advancing anthropological understanding. This would surely be an ethical consideration for any anthropologist working with the Rama and Kriol communities in the immediate term due to the increasingly totalitarian nature of the present Nicaraguan government, which has repeatedly sought to exploit any divisions within and between the Rama and Kriol communities to overcome their resistance. Beyond this immediate necessity, as a settler anthropologist, I seek to contribute to the Rama and Kriol struggle in part by archiving Rama and Kriol political thought in this particular moment. I hope future Rama and Kriol scholars will find use for the data I have collected alongside the Rama and Kriol communities that I will not use in this dissertation. As in any work of anthropology, I have left many gaps, both intentionally and surely unintentionally. My friends, comrades, and interlocutors in the Rama and Kriol communities have engaged in their own acts of ethnographic refusal by filtering what they tell me as they put me to work for them. This dissertation should be read accordingly.

Notes

[1] In 2019, two young Kriol men, Brandon Lovo and Glen Slate, were convicted of the murder and sentenced to 23 and 12 years in prison, respectively, despite a total absence of incriminating evidence. They were freed several months later, and there have been no further arrests in the case.

VITA

EDUCATION

2013 B.A. Political Science, Amherst College

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PUBLICATIONS

Refereed Articles

2020 Mayer, J. L. "Conceptualizing Settler Colonialism in Nicaragua." *Urban Anthropology* and *Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development* 49, no. 3–4: 195–245.

2020 Betts, J. T., J. F. Mendoza Espinoza, A. J. Dans, C. A. Jordan, J. L. Mayer, and G. R. Urquhart. "Fishing with Pesticides Affects River Fisheries and Community Health in the Indio Maíz Biological Reserve, Nicaragua." *Sustainability* 12, no. 23: 10152. https://doi.org/10.3390/su122310152.

Refereed Chapters in Edited Volumes

2019 Mayer, J. L. "Negotiating Consultation: The Duty to Consult and Contestation of Autonomy in Nicaragua's Rama-Kriol Territory." In *Indigenous Struggles for Autonomy: The Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua*, edited by Luciano Baracco, 99–130. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

SELECTED GRANTS, FELLOWSHIPS, AND AWARDS

2022 UCLA Dissertation Year Fellowship

2021 UCLA Collegium of University Teaching Fellows

2019 NSF Doctoral Dissertation Research Improvement Grant

2019 SSRC International Dissertation Research Fellowship

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Introduction

In the early morning hours of March 3, 2020, I boarded a flight with the Indigenous Rama lawyer Becky McCray and the Afrodescendant Kriol leader Dolene Miller at Augusto C. Sandino International Airport in Managua, Nicaragua. Nine hours and one connecting flight later, we landed at Toussaint Louverture International Airport in Port-au-Prince, Haiti.[1] A member of Haitian diplomatic security met us on the jet bridge and escorted us to a special building for our entry processing. Security loaded us into black SUVs. Our motorcade sped across the city and into the hills of Pétion-Ville, one of the wealthiest suburbs of the capital. We arrived at the Hotel Karibe, a luxury hotel where, two days later, I sat at a table in a dimly-lit conference room. Across from me were the four members and the executive secretary of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), a body of the Organization of American States that hears petitions from people accusing states of violating their human rights. At tables to my left and right were, respectively, the petitioners and respondents in *The Miskitu Indigenous Community at Tasbapounie; the Community of African Descent at Monkey Point; the Rama Indigenous People; and the Black Creole Indigenous Community of Bluefields v. Nicaragua*.

The case revolved around the Nicaraguan state's actions between 2012 and 2016 while approving an infrastructural megaproject: the Grand Interoceanic Canal of Nicaragua. The canal, which Nicaragua's government estimated to cost US$50 billion, would be wider and deeper than the newly expanded Panama Canal. Petitioners in this case alleged that the Nicaraguan government had broken a slew of domestic and international laws by approving a canal project that would cut through their ancestral territories, most of which the state had already formally recognized. I had been conducting ethnographic research in the territory of the Indigenous Rama

and Afrodescendant Kriol peoples at the time that the Nicaraguan government sought retroactive approval for the canal from the affected communities, so the petitioners called me as a witness.[2] The IACHR was to shield my identity to avoid reprisals from the government and pro-government groups in Nicaragua.

Joel Hernández, the IACHR president, set out the ground rules, and Nicaraguan Indigenous rights attorney María Luisa Acosta began my 15-minute examination. The questions centered around the key details in the government's attempts to gain the Rama and Kriol communities' approval for the canal. "What was the process like for the [Rama-Kriol Territorial Government's] approval of guidelines for the consultation process?" "What is your evaluation of the consultation process that the state claims to have carried out? Was it free? Was it prior? Was it informed?" "Did community members and community leaders understand the consultation process as having concluded?" I testified that government officials pressured the communities to approve the project, that supposed consultation process violated all key international norms, and that the consultation process was never completed.

When the petitioners' time was up, the state delegation had the opportunity to cross-examine me, and the tone of the questioning instantly changed. Claudia Núñez, a lawyer from the Nicaraguan Attorney General's Office, asked me not about my qualifications, the events I witnessed, or the way I developed my assessments. Instead, she began with a question that does not directly address the facts of the case. She asked, violating an order not to name me, "Mr. Mayer, are you aware that Nicaragua is the most advanced country in the hemisphere with respect to the restoration of the rights of Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples? Are you aware of this recognition from the Nicaraguan people of Nicaragua's Indigenous territory?"

Between 1987 and 2010, successive Nicaraguan governments have approved laws, constitutional amendments, and international instruments in response to Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples' struggle for self-determination. These include a 1987 Autonomy Statute (Law 28) that created an autonomous political system for two regions on the Caribbean coast; a 2003 law (Law 445) creating a process for the state to demarcate and title the territories of Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples; and the government's 2010 ratification of International Labour Organization Convention 169, which recognizes Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples' right to their territories and the state's duty to consult with them prior to approving projects that affect them. As a result of these laws, nearly a third of the Nicaraguan landmass has been titled to Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples, making Nicaragua a key example of Latin America's territorial turn in Indigenous and Afrodescendant rights (Offen 2003). I was certainly aware of these laws; Indigenous and Afrodescendant leaders had imprinted them in my brain early in my research in Nicaragua through repeated recitations, recalling these trophies from past struggles. Yet this hearing addressed obvious violations of each of these laws. "I would say that the Nicaraguan state has approved nice laws on the theme of Indigenous and Afrodescendant rights," I responded. "Compliance with those laws is another thing entirely."

In her questioning, Núñez gestured toward a contradiction at the heart of the proceedings. We were discussing the failure of the Nicaraguan government to comply with laws in a venue constituted by states that refuse to comply with laws. The member states of the Organization of American States are responsible for electing the commissioners of the IACHR and the judges of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, the latter of which has the formal authority to make binding decisions in cases where the IACHR finds violations of the American Convention of Human Rights. These member states include Brazil, which defied the IACHR and built the Belo

Monte Dam; Honduras, which defied the Inter-American Court and refused to effectively protect Garífuna lands in Punta Piedra; and the United States, which has refused to even ratify the American Convention on Human Rights. There was certainly a degree of irony for me—an involuntary representative of the United States—to criticize the Nicaraguan state given the constant failures of the United States to live up to treaty obligations to Native nations, whether with respect to the violent imposition of the Dakota Access Pipeline, the perpetual underfunding of the Indian Health Service, or the US Supreme Court's latest effort to erode Native sovereignty in *Oklahoma v. Castro-Huerta*. How could the IACHR single out Nicaragua for violating its extraordinary legal regime for Indigenous and Afrodescendant territorial rights when it is standard practice for states in the Americas to violate Indigenous and Afrodescendant rights?

This dissertation examines Indigenous and Afrodescendant territoriality after the approval of laws recognizing territorial rights. The case of Nicaragua's Grand Interoceanic Canal illustrates this moment in Nicaragua, the Americas, and much of the rest of the settler colonial world: Many states have now formally recognized in their laws and jurisprudence that Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples have territorial rights. These regimes of territorial recognition have hailed Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples into formalized, institutional modes of self-governance and policymaking that have reshaped community politics. Nevertheless, these legal recognitions have made little difference in terms of the ongoing dispossession of Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples. Why are these legal recognitions of territorial rights not preventing the dispossession of Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples? How are Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples responding to this failure? In what ways are new regimes of territorial governance shaping Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples' responses and the way they experience territory in the world?

In answering these questions, I focus in on one, exemplary territory: that of the Indigenous Rama and Afrodescendant Kriol peoples of southeastern Nicaragua. In December 2009, the Nicaraguan government handed nine Rama and Kriol communities a formal, inalienable, communal title to the Rama-Kriol Territory: a massive stretch of 4,000 km^2 of land and a similar amount of maritime territory. In the process, the Rama and Kriol peoples developed new communal and territorial institutions to govern that territory, including a confederated Rama-Kriol Territorial Government with an elected legislature and executive. Instead of these changes resulting in Rama and Kriol self-determination within their territory, the Rama and Kriol peoples have seen heightened dispossession, violence, ecological destruction, and impositions of state authority—including for the canal project—over the past 14 years. In short, the years since territorial titling have resulted in less freedom for the Rama and Kriol communities—freedom to live as they wish in their territory. I have participated in and studied the Rama and Kriol communities' struggle for freedom for much of the past eight years.

My argument here is two-fold. First, I argue that territorial recognition has failed to result in Indigenous and Afrodescendant freedom because it relies on the recognition of a settler colonial state constrained within an imperialist, racial capitalist system. The settler states of the Americas are structurally inclined to dispossess Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples through the enclosure of their territories and exploitation of their labor. This dispossession benefits a settler capitalist class within the country. Further, United States imperialism reproduces features of North American settler colonialism in settler colonies of the Global South through a conjunctural relationship with the settler colonial structure. Borrowing from Judith Irvine and Susan Gal's proposed semiotic categories, I describe this relationship as fractally recursive colonialism. That is, it is a form of colonialism that "involves the projection of an opposition,

salient at some level of relationship, onto some other level" (Irvine and Gal 2000, 38).[3] This analysis allows for productive comparisons across Abya Yala with respect to Native sovereignty and settler colonialism.

Second, despite the failure of territorial recognition to enhance Indigenous and Afrodescendant freedom, I find that the Rama and Kriol communities are producing territorial relations through acts of governance, jurisdictional claims, and economic projects within and beyond their recognized territory. I conceptualize the production of territorial relations in the Rama and Kriol communities as a *territorial conjuring*. I use the word *conjure* in two senses: First, I refer to a common use: "to bring, get, move, convey, as by magic" ("Conjure, v." 2022, sec. III.9.b). Using this first sense, by *conjuring territory*, I mean that Rama and Kriol people, as well as a broader field of allied actors, seek to produce a territory that is free from dispossession despite the world-historic processes of racial capitalism that constantly seek to expropriate greater productive forces. Second, I refer to a historical use of the word: "to be sworn together in a confederacy or conspiracy" ("Conjure, v." 2022, sec. I.1.b). In this second sense of *conjuring territory*, I mean that Rama and Kriol people are producing their territory through acts that hail themselves and others into their laws, their jurisdiction, and ultimately, their sovereignty—even as the institutional arrangements through which they conduct many of these activities threaten to hail Rama and Kriol people into settler, multiculturalist regimes of subject formation.

It is critical to understand how Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples conjure territory both for the purposes of social analysis and for the political project of producing a more just world. Territoriality is not something that is produced through one-time, physical seizures of territory. Humans produce territoriality through long processes of claims and counterclaims; through significations and resignifications of territorial features; through mutual entanglements

and co-dependencies across human and non-human actors. This dissertation examines these processes in a context of intense territorial contestation. In doing so, I take inspiration from the extensive literature on the techniques that Native peoples in the United States and Canada have used to re-establish territorial authority, jurisdiction, and sovereignty amid and against settler colonialism.[4] As Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples (re)build sovereignty in growing areas of the world, their political thought and modes of governance need to be taken seriously—not only from a justice-oriented perspective, but simply in order to understand how vast portions of the world are being governed.

From the perspective of producing a more just and survivable world, it is essential to understand how Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples in settler colonies of the Global South are fighting to get free. It is an oft-touted fact that Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples are stewards of critical carbon sinks and much of the world's biodiversity.[5] This is particularly the case in Nicaragua, where Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples' territories include an estimated 63 percent of forest carbon (Rights and Resources Initiative, Woods Hole Research Center, and Landmark 2016). This relationship is neither coincidental nor mysterious; the entwined processes of colonialism and capitalism have resulted in Indigenous genocide and ecocide in the lands seized from Indigenous peoples (Davis and Todd 2017; Whyte 2017; 2022). Indigenous territories today are sites where, in spite of the apocalyptic destruction of settler colonialism, Indigenous peoples have survived and maintained their relationships with the non-human world—relationships not structured by extraction at all costs (Whyte 2017; citing Gross 2016, 33). The lesson here is not that settlers should emulate abstract Indigenous values; scholars of climate colonialism remind us that Indigenous stewardship is not something to be appropriated for all of humanity (Davis and Todd 2017; Whyte, Caldwell, and Schaefer 2020).

Rather, my point here is that the survival of all of humanity is contingent on decolonization—on the restoration of territory and sovereignty to Indigenous peoples and the destruction of racial capitalism, as I argue in more detail below. In this dissertation, I make the case that in settler colonies of the Global South like Nicaragua, the ongoing expansion of settler colonialism is intimately connected with settler imperialism from the Global North. No amount of legal recognition will halt the colonization of Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples' territories in the Global South—and their carbon sinks and biodiversity—unless the capitalist, imperialist relationship between the Global North and Global South is broken. That is, processes of decolonization in the Global North and Global South are mutually necessary, and humanity's survival of the climate crisis is contingent on the success of both processes.

The Rama-Kriol Territory is an ideal site in Latin America for understanding territorial conjurings. First, its current situation is reflective of a scenario that is playing out throughout the continent: Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples hold a legal, state-recognized, collective title to a vast territory (Bryan 2012), but extractive, developmentalist projects are contributing to growing dispossession (e.g., Gómez-Barris 2017; Gustafson 2020; Loperena 2023; Riofrancos 2020). As a result, the Rama and Kriol peoples continue having to struggle to make their territory socio-politically real for themselves, for settlers, for state officials, for capitalists, and for international institutions.

Second, Nicaragua is an exemplary case both for the strength of its laws and for its current government's closure of institutional spaces for contestation. As mentioned above, between 1987 and 2010, Nicaragua responded to the demands of Indigenous and Afrodescendant social movements by approving laws recognizing Indigenous and Afrodescendant territorial rights. The country was perhaps the epicenter of the neoliberal multiculturalism model: a model

in which states, with support and even pressure from international financial institutions, recognized limited collective rights that aligned with neoliberal economic policies in order to encapsulate Indigenous and Afrodescendant movements and exclude their more radical demands (Hale 2005; Speed 2005). By the end of the 2010s, this moment was widely seen as having ended in the Americas, with openly white supremacist, authoritarian governments rising throughout the region (e.g., Hale and Mullings 2020). As I will discuss further below, the present Nicaraguan government certainly fits with this return to authoritarianism in Latin America, though its leaders claim to be anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist. Whereas the neoliberal multiculturalism moment was characterized by an opening for protest and dialogue, if not radical political change, the present authoritarian retrenchment in Nicaragua and a handful of other Latin American countries has made protest an increasingly risky proposition. As a result, Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples have had to pursue alternative methods for maneuvering around, or placing pressure on, Nicaragua's central government.

Third, the Rama-Kriol Territory reflects the complexity and diversity of Indigenous and Afrodescendant territories in Latin America. During the process of territorial titling, Indigenous and Afrodescendant leaders in Nicaragua decided to pursue communal land titles for massive, multi-communal territories, which helped to avoid intercommunal conflicts in a process that inevitably translated complex networks of relations with territory into the form of property (Bryan 2011; Hale 2011). The Rama-Kriol Territory is one such multi-communal territory. While the territory could be summarized as containing six Indigenous Rama and three Afrodescendant Kriol communities, the reality is that these communities are far from bounded, static entities that fall within one label. Identities and territorial relations are porous and multifaceted. The communities include, in addition to Rama and Kriol people, mestizo people,

Indigenous Miskitu and Mayangna people, Afro-Indigenous Garífuna people, and Kriol people who have relocated from elsewhere in the region. Community members regularly relocate between communities within the territory, cities elsewhere in Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and—more rarely—the United States. This reality reflects the complexities often seen in Indigenous and Afrodescendant territories in the Americas.

On the Rama-Kriol Project of Afro-Indigeneity

Today's state-recognized Rama-Kriol Territory consists of six Indigenous Rama communities and three Afrodescendant Kriol communities in southeastern Nicaragua. These peoples have a history of shared freedom struggles, relationships with territory, and kinship dating back at least to the 18th century. As with other communities on the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua, the Rama-Kriol Territory emerged as a political project rooted in these shared struggles (Gordon, Gurdián, and Hale 2003). That said, I do not wish to romanticize the relationship between Rama and Kriol communities. As a result of ongoing, colonial projects of ethnicization that have labeled, divided, and homogenized racially and colonially subjugated peoples in Nicaragua (see Chapter 1), tensions often arise between and within Rama and Kriol communities that relate to identity. I choose not to center those tensions in this dissertation outside of this brief mention. I take this decision for two reasons. First, there are enormous potential harms to airing the nature of divisions within and between communities facing settler colonial violence and dispossession. Second, these divisions—though salient in the day-to-day political life of the communities—pale in comparison with the durability of alliances between Rama and Kriol communities in their struggles against settler colonization.[6] Following Jennifer

Goett (2017, 92), I highlight bonds that mobilize against structural oppression, which are far deeper than the tensions that structural oppression itself engenders.

An ethnography of both Indigenous Rama and Afrodescendant Kriol communities raises questions of terminology. In daily life in the communities and in legal regimes of multicultural recognition, multiple labels have been applied to the Rama and Kriol communities. While Nicaraguan laws, Inter-American jurisprudence, and international instruments universally hail Rama people into the category of "Indigenous," Kriol people have been labeled as "Afrodescendant," "tribal," and "ethnic communities," among other terms. This reflects an effort to subsume Kriol people and other peoples of African descent into an Indigenous-like category so that they may access similar rights to Indigenous peoples under multiculturalist regimes. This subsumption typically results in the erasure of the racialized dimension of their oppression (Dulitzky 2010; Hooker 2005).

Within the communities, self-descriptive labels also vary. Rama people most often use the term "Indian" to label their identity with the condition of being the original people of a particular location prior to colonization. The label "Indigenous" has also gained currency among Rama people who engage in conversations with legal advisors and staff with international organizations. Meanwhile, Kriol people often use the terms "Afrodescendant" or "Black" to highlight and celebrate their diasporic identity (see also Goett 2017, 10; Gordon 1998; Morris 2023). The use of those terms varies in ways that are akin to the difference between the use of "Indian" and "Indigenous": "Black" is generally used within the Kriol communities, but "Afrodescendant" is often preferred in conversations with legal advisors and international organizations. Kriol people also often highlight an Indigenous component to their identity by

referring to Indigenous (mostly Rama or Miskitu) ancestors or by claiming Indigeneity to the Caribbean coast as Kriol people.[7]

Amid these many forms of identification, this dissertation employs the term "Afro-Indigenous" to refer to a collective Rama and Kriol *project* that emerges through the conjuring of territory—not an *identity*. To be clear, Rama and Kriol people do not identify themselves as Afro-Indigenous. Instead, I refer to a project of Afro-Indigeneity for five purposes that demonstrate the polysemy of that term, as argued by Saginaw Chippewa and Black historian Kyle T. Mays (2021). First, it is a way of refusing to participate in colonial projects of ethnicization that describe the Rama and Kriol peoples as bounded, discrete communities and instead of emphasizing the long-term political and kinship relations between Rama and Kriol communities. Second, the term emphasizes that the Rama-Kriol Territory is a territorial unit that Rama and Kriol people jointly place at the core of their struggle for freedom and against dispossession. Third, the term centers the specifically Black and African diasporic identities of Kriol people, and some Rama-identifying people, as opposed to treating Kriol people as only distinctive from the mestizo nation in terms of an Indigenous-like culture. Further, as Mays notes, people of African descent in the Americas descend from Indigenous African ancestors. In the Black history of the Americas, people of Indigenous African descent often have reconfigured their relationships with the natural world in Africa in order to survive and gain freedom in the Americas, frequently drawing from and contributing to the lifeways and foodways of Indigenous peoples of the Americas.[8] Fourth, the term evokes parallels between the Rama-Kriol project of Afro-Indigeneity and similar projects around the hemisphere. Fifth, to draw from Tiffany Lethabo King's *The Black Shoals* (2019), Afro-Indigenous refers to the entangled projects of

African and Indigenous enslavement, exploitation, and dispossession, through which capitalism, liberalism, and white supremacy are constituted.

The project of Afro-Indigeneity presents a challenge to hegemonic racial formations in Central America. The dominant racial category in the region is the mestizo, referring to people of mixed European and Indigenous ancestry. From the early 20th century, the hegemonic racial idea in Central America and Mexico has converted mestizo identity into a national identity by mixing Indigenous connections with national territory together with white supremacist ideas about European rationality (e.g., Euraque, Gould, and Hale 2005; see also Chapter 1). This formulation positions mestizo people above Indigenous people in the national racial hierarchy and altogether erases and excludes Black identities. Hegemonic mestizaje situates mixedness as part of a progressively homogenizing, settler-nationalist project, and opposes it to the supposed stagnancy and backwardness of bounded Indigenous and Afrodescendant identities and communities.

Afro-Indigeneity, by contrast, creates space for identities and communities that neither accept the fiction of being static and bounded nor participate in hegemonic forms of mixing that contribute to the fiction of mestizo homogeneity. This is true of peoples who *do* identify explicitly as Afro-Indigenous, like the Garífuna people (Anderson 2009; Loperena 2023). It is true of the especially fluid identities among the Indigenous Miskitu communities known historically as Zambo Miskitus, who descend from both Miskitu ancestors and enslaved soldiers from the state of Mbwila in present-day Angola who were shipwrecked on the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua in the 17th century (Thornton 2017; also Offen 2002; 2010).[9] And it is also true in the case of the Rama-Kriol *project* of Afro-Indigeneity, where long-term, intercommunal solidarity has opposed the hegemonic project of mestizaje. Across these cases, Afro-Indigeneity

creates space for pride of being Black and/or Indigenous and of having a shared future in opposition to white supremacist, settler racial formations.

The Rama-Kriol Peoples and Territory

To date, the only dedicated history of the Rama and Kriol peoples of the Rama-Kriol Territory comes in the form of the thoroughly researched report that the communities submitted to the Nicaraguan government as part of their request for territorial titling (Gobierno Territorial Rama y Kriol 2007). I certainly do not seek to produce a comprehensive history of the territory or its peoples in this dissertation, nor do I believe it is my position to do so; it is my hope that future Rama and Kriol historians will be the ones to write this history. Instead, I want to provide here a brief review of the history and present situation of the Rama and Kriol peoples and their territory for two purposes: first, to offer readers—especially Rama and Kriol readers—a compilation of key historical sources, and second, to give readers sufficient historical context for the material to come.[10] This historical overview focuses on the histories of the Rama and Kriol communities; Chapter 1 provides a broader account of the colonial history of Nicaragua, including its Caribbean coast.

The history of the Rama people is deeply connected with the rivers, lagoons, and coasts of what is today the eastern region of southern Nicaragua and northern Costa Rica. Based on a combination of oral traditions, archaeological and linguistic evidence, and Spanish colonial reports, it appears that this region was highly diverse in the centuries prior to the colonial invasion. The Rama people, like most of these peoples, spoke languages in the Votic subfamily of the Chibchan family; others—possibly later immigrants to region—spoke languages in the Nahua and Misumalpan language families (Ibarra Rojas 2014). According to the oral traditions

of the Máleku Indigenous people of present-day northern Costa Rica, the Máleku people lived together with another people they called the Pótos around the time of the Spanish invasion; these were probably the ancestors of the Ramas (Constenla Umaña and Ibarra Rojas 2014). The Pótos, recorded by the Spanish as the Votos or Botos, eventually moved east and north into what is today the Rama-Kriol Territory in Nicaragua. In the 18th century, Rama people lived along the San Juan River—a strategic waterway contested by the Spanish and British—and its tributaries along today's border between Nicaragua and Costa Rica (Kemble [1780] 1885, 22). By this time, the Indigenous Miskitu people of northeastern Nicaragua and eastern Honduras had formed a military and commercial alliance with the British, which prevented the Spanish from establishing colonial control throughout much of eastern Central America (Baracco 2019; Offen 1999; C. A. Williams 2013). This sphere of Miskitu-British influence in present-day Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica became known as the Mosquito Shore, the Mosquito Coast, or the Mosquitia, and the British recognized a Miskitu king as its ruler. The Rama people, by contrast to the Miskitu, largely avoided interactions with the British and Spanish in the early colonial period (Offen 1999, 113; C. A. Williams 2013).

By the end of the 18th century, Rama people lived both along the San Juan River and its tributaries and in communities in the Mosquitia from Tortuguero, Costa Rica, to Bluefields, Nicaragua, where they lived in close proximity to Indigenous Kukra, Ulwa, and Miskitu people, British settlers, and enslaved Africans (Lehmann 1920; Loveland 1975, 109–15; O. W. Roberts 1827). During this period, the Rama faced growing encroachment on their territory, violence, and enslavement at the hands of the British, Spanish, and Miskitu, forcing Rama people to navigate relations with them (Ayón [1882] 1977, 3:210–12; Gobierno Territorial Rama y Kriol 2007, 36; Loveland 1975, 110–12; Offen 1999, 330). Colonial sources report that the Ramas paid

tribute to the British-supported Miskitu king, who had granted the Ramas the right to live on the small island of Rama Cay in Bluefields Lagoon (Conzemius 1927, 10; Gobierno Territorial Rama y Kriol 2007, 38; Loveland 1975, 112; Offen 2015, 44–45). Rama people also sent delegations to meet with Spanish colonial authorities to reach agreements to establish new, autonomous communities away from the violence they had encountered (Ayón [1882] 1977, 3:210–12; Loveland 1975, 110–12).

In European accounts from the 19th century, Rama people are recorded as living semi-nomadically throughout this region. They moved between residences along the coast and up rivers that provided different opportunities for fishing, turtling, hunting, small-scale agriculture, and gathering. In addition to native crops, Rama people grew rice, plantains, and coconuts as staple foods (Jürgensen [1885] 2014). According to Rama and Kriol oral histories, spiritual leaders—turmala in the Rama language—also held temporal authority in Rama communities (Gobierno Territorial Rama y Kriol 2007, 36–37). In both European accounts and Rama and Kriol oral histories, these turmalas are identified as including both men and women (Gobierno Territorial Rama y Kriol 2007, 75; Lehmann 1920, 416–17; Loveland 1975, 110). By the middle of the 19th century, some older Rama people on Rama Cay spoke limited English (Jürgensen [1885] 2014); perhaps they had spoken it with British traders and the English-speaking descendants of enslaved Indigenous and Afrodescendant people in the region. They might have also spoken it as a lingua franca with Miskitu people, though the extensive use of Miskitu words in the Rama language suggests that many Rama people were also conversant in Miskitu. Otherwise, Rama people seem to have spoken the Rama language at that time.

African people and their descendants have lived on the southern Caribbean coast of present-day Nicaragua at least since the early 18th century, and Kriol identity came into being in

the early 19th century. As early as the 17th century, kidnapped Africans who had survived shipwrecks and escaped enslaved individuals likely arrived in this region from Spanish plantations to the west and south and from English and Spanish colonies in the Caribbean (Gordon 1998, 33). In the 18th century, British settlers established plantations with African and Indigenous slave labor in the present-day Rama-Kriol Territory and its immediate surroundings, including in Bluefields, Punta Gorda, and Corn River (Gordon 1998, 33). Enslaved people worked in households, cutting wood, cattle ranching, transporting goods, and some agriculture (Offen 2023). Free people of partial African descent also immigrated to these communities from elsewhere in the Caribbean (Gordon 1998, 35). In 1786, most British settlers were required to depart from the Mosquitia under the Convention of London, in which the British government confirmed its recognition of Spanish sovereignty in the Mosquitia. Many of them, presumably, brought enslaved people with them. Notably, however, the former British superintendent in the region switched allegiances and backed the Spanish, allowing him to keep his plantation in Bluefields. This was short-lived; Miskitu forces, joined by his slaves, permanently ousted him from the Mosquitia in 1790 (Gordon 1998, 35–37). Over the following decades, his former slaves and their descendants came to identify themselves as Kriols and became the dominant group in the Mosquitia at a time when the Spanish forces, and then Mexican, Central American, and Nicaraguan forces, were unable to colonize the region (Gordon 1998, 35–42).

Amid this newfound autonomy from European colonialism and slavery, Afrodescendant people from elsewhere in the Caribbean made their way to the southern Mosquitia. Kriol oral histories about mid-19th century ancestors offer a narrative of arrival into a space of Afro-Indigenous freedom. Jennifer Goett (2017, chap. 1) presents oral histories from Kriol women in the community of Monkey Point, who told her of Black and Miskitu ancestors who fled slavery

in the Cayman Islands and northern Mosquitia, respectively, and arrived in the region in the first half of the 19th century. Some of their ancestors received permission to settle in Rama territory from a turmala named Jerome, and Rama people offered them seeds and guidance on working the land (Gobierno Territorial Rama y Kriol 2007, 53). These new arrivals formed communities in Monkey Point and Red Bank, among other places, situating themselves nearby their Rama neighbors (Gobierno Territorial Rama y Kriol 2007, 53–54). They emulated Rama modes of subsistence, including maintaining multiple residences around the area, and developed kinship relations with Rama people over the following generations (Gobierno Territorial Rama y Kriol 2007, 54).

By the 1840s, Rama and Kriol people began to face growing constraints on their freedom to move through the area as British, Nicaraguan, and U.S. interests in the region intensified. In the south, the 1840s brought growing imperial interest in the San Juan River as a waterway that nearly connected the Pacific and Atlantic; steamships could travel from the mouth of the San Juan at Greytown (once also known as San Juan del Norte and today also known as San Juan de Nicaragua) on the Caribbean up to Lake Nicaragua, the western coast of which is a short carriage or train ride to the Pacific. The new businesses that emerged on the San Juan employed Indigenous people—probably both Miskitu and Rama people—as guides, oarsmen, canoe makers, hunters, and fishers (Dozier 1985, chap. 4). In the north, Rama people became increasingly incorporated into the market at Bluefields. In 1846, when Prussian settlers arrived in Bluefields in a failed attempt to establish a colony, the British representative in the region hired Rama people to hunt a manatee and provide vegetables as provisions for the group (Dozier 1985, 53). With the approval of newly established British officials in the region, the Moravian Church built a mission on Rama Cay in 1857. The German missionary there obtained permission from

the Miskitu king to effectively serve as sovereign on Rama Cay (Offen and Rugely 2014, 50–52), and he sought to use this authority to force Rama people on the island to speak English, attend church, spend more time on the island, and halt many of the practices through which they relate to the non-human world (Jürgensen [1885] 2014). While Rama people found ways to resist and adapt, the Moravian presence on Rama Cay did begin an ongoing process of language shift from Rama to the English-based Rama Cay Creole, sedentarization, and elimination of practices meant to keep up good relations with animals and plants. If Rama Cay became the node of Moravian missionary power, the mainland became a zone of relative freedom. The missionaries remained on Rama Cay, so Rama people could continue speaking their language and living with relative autonomy when they were away from the island. To this day, the primary community of Rama language speakers has continued to be on the mainland rather than on Rama Cay.

Later in the 19th century, Rama and Kriol life became still further circumscribed as a result of imperial economic interests. In the 1840s, the United States government began pressuring the United Kingdom to renounce its support of the Mosquitia government and instead allow the Nicaraguan state to claim sovereignty over the region. As discussed in greater detail in Chapter 1, this was a result of United States economic interests in the region; the United States wished to dominate the transit route across Nicaragua, and later the fruit and rubber sectors on the Caribbean coast, without British influence. In the Treaty of Managua of 1860, the British government signed over underlying sovereignty in the Mosquitia to Nicaragua, which agreed to recognize an autonomous Mosquito Reserve governed by the former king of the Mosquitia. Notably, the Reserve excluded nearly all of the present-day Rama-Kriol Territory; San Juan del Norte was to become a free port. By the 1880s, the fruit and rubber business was booming in the Mosquito Reserve, and the U.S. companies that operate there came to resent the autonomy of the

Reserve government, which had authority over taxation, land grants, and business concessions. In 1894, Nicaragua fully annexed the Mosquito Reserve through a U.S.-backed military occupation of the region, formally ending the Reserve's government and canceling San Juan del Norte's status as a free port. Over the following decades, Nicaraguan governments issued massive land grants to family members and political allies in the Rama-Kriol Territory, though few actually took them up. More important for the lives of Rama and Kriol people was the massive growth in extractive U.S. businesses in the region with a demand for wage laborers, including the banana, rubber, coconut, fishing, and turtling sectors, all of which exploited Rama and Kriol labor, as well as the labor of newly arrived Black Caribbean workers. While territorial enclosures certainly affected Rama and Kriol people prior to the overthrow of the Mosquitia, they took on a new, intensified character under Nicaraguan rule. The details of these enclosures will be explored further in chapters 1 and 3. For now, I want to provide a brief introduction to the contemporary political conjuncture in Nicaragua and its relationship with U.S. imperialism.

The Nicaraguan State and Contemporary U.S. Imperialism

Since the late 19th century, each Nicaraguan government has faced the competing challenges of sufficiently satisfying the U.S. government, lenders, elites, and the popular classes to avoid being removed from power by each of those groups. These governments have found a wide range of models to address these needs, but, in the end, each model has ultimately failed due to the impossibility of satisfying all of these challenges simultaneously. As a premise for my analysis in the rest of this dissertation, I propose that the Nicaraguan state should be understood as a highly constrained developmental state. U.S. threats of military or clandestine intervention always mean that the state must pay its debts and align with U.S. economic and military

interests. I describe the role of the U.S. government and international institutions in shaping Nicaraguan policy with regard to the Caribbean coast in Chapter 2. Nevertheless, successive governments have taken a highly interventionist role in determining which industries and projects to prioritize, and their choices have been guided by the white supremacist racial formations described in further detail in Chapter 1. Rather than some static inheritance from Spanish colonialism, those racial formations are constantly remade through imperialism.

As mentioned above, in this dissertation, I conceptualize the relationship between Nicaraguan settler colonialism and U.S. and Global North imperialism as fractally recursive. The relationship between the Global North and Nicaragua, taken as a whole, is characterized by the racialized-as-white Global North's use of violence and other coercive tools against the racialized-as-brown Nicaragua to bring about control, exploitation, and expropriation to enrich the Global North bourgeoisie and subsidize the basic commodities purchased by the working class. This opposition is then projected onto the relationship between the racialized-as-mestizo settler state and racialized-as-Black-and-Indian Afro-Indigenous peoples of Nicaragua. The settler state promotes the violent dispossession and exploitation of Afro-Indigenous peoples in order to enrich mestizo elites and provide for the means of subsistence of poor mestizos. In the latter case, this dispossession and exploitation also feeds into the Global North's imperialist extraction of value from Nicaragua.

This fractally recursive colonialism plays out today in the Nicaraguan state's entrepreneurial search for development opportunities to generate revenues and break out of the Global North's imperialist debt trap. In order to pay its debts under the Washington Consensus, Nicaragua must constantly grow the amount of U.S. dollars coming into the country to outpace the accumulation of interest. Under the current government of President Daniel Ortega and his

Sandinista National Liberation Front (2007–), such entrepreneurial opportunities have included the proposed Grand Interoceanic Canal mentioned in the opening; the expansion of gold mining, cattle ranching, and forestry for export; and, most recently, forgivable loans to Nicaragua for the promotion of agricultural activities that purport to contribute fewer greenhouse gas emissions and better maintain carbon sinks than the present baseline for such activities. As will be examined further in this dissertation, each of these opportunities relies on Afro-Indigenous dispossession.

In short, imperialism and settler colonialism in Nicaragua are today impelled through the debt-driven imperative of growth, which also drives the climate crisis. Amid a global, debt-based economic system, the rate of growth in any debt-holding entity must exceed the interest rate on its debts. When looking at reified national economies (see Appel 2019), it is obvious that the rule of growth is enforced unevenly; global military powers are more likely to use their military to enforce debts in some countries than others. Globally, though, growth is an imperative to avoid widespread credit and currency crises. The notion that the current model of permanent growth can continue indefinitely depends upon the elision of two critical facts: first, that land and its capacity for productiveness are finite; and second, that growth generates greenhouse gases (Jones 2019). The limits on land mean that economic growth necessitates a trend of ever-growing Afro-Indigenous dispossession. The relationship between growth and greenhouse gas emissions means that economic growth is incompatible with having a habitable planet in the future. In the Rama-Kriol Territory, there is a clear relationship between both of these points. On the one hand, the imperative of growth drives Rama-Kriol dispossession at the hands of state actors and settlers driven by growth-oriented financing. On the other hand, the debt-driven climate crisis makes alternatives to growth decreasingly feasible in the Rama-Kriol Territory. Many Rama and Kriol

people would prefer to stay away from the imperative of growth by continuing to practice subsistence agriculture, fishing, hunting, and gathering with only limited market interactions. Yet the climate crisis has made these practices, and especially agriculture and gathering, less viable as subsistence strategies due to the increasing frequency of natural disasters like hurricanes and the decreasing predictability of seasons, which are key to Rama and Kriol planting, harvesting, and gathering. This combines with the effects of climate change in Nicaragua's Dry Corridor, where ever-longer and more severe droughts are driving settlers toward the Rama-Kriol Territory in search of lands (C. de Castro 2016). Settlers, drawn by growth-oriented financing or fleeing growth-driven climate change, affect the lands and waters of the Rama-Kriol Territory in ways that intertwine with the effects of climate change. In particular, they deforest river banks, leading to sedimentation in rivers and decreasing river biodiversity, which affects Rama-Kriol fishing (Betts et al. 2021). The actions of the U.S. and other Global North governments to enforce debts thus drives Rama-Kriol dispossession *and* reduces the freedom of Rama and Kriol people to reduce their participation in growth-oriented, debt-driven economic activities.

Fractally recursive colonialism results in extraordinary violence that is distributed along hierarchies of race, class, and gender. As Kwame Nkrumah (1965) and Silvia Federici (1990) noted amid the formal decolonization of Africa, the end of formal colonial rule only replaces the colonial rulers with postcolonial rulers who are equally reliant upon approval from the metropole due to the threats of coups. After formal decolonization, colonial policies are now dictated by embassies and international financial institutions with elite local staff. When discontent arises, postcolonial rulers deploy violence against protesters using weapons and military training provided by imperial powers. Nicaragua demonstrates that this is equally true in settler colonies of the Global South. As with the Somoza regime in the last century, the Ortega regime has rained

extraordinary violence upon the poor and working classes when they protest, as exemplified in the killings of hundreds of people amid protests against social security cuts in 2018. Though the Ortega government determined the exact nature of cuts, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) had insisted for years that the Nicaraguan government needed to make significant cuts to social security to prevent a future deficit increase. Meanwhile, Nicaraguan police long received training and equipment from the U.S., including an average $3.9 million in assistance per year under the Obama administration (Schrader 2017).

On the Caribbean coast, settlers use weapons of war, undoubtedly including weapons that the U.S. provided during the Contra war, in attacks on Afro-Indigenous peoples, which have especially affected Afro-Indigenous women. These attacks have killed more than 60 Indigenous people since 2015 and generated a broader context of terror and vulnerability (Oakland Institute 2021a).[11] Settlers often attack Afro-Indigenous communities to seize their lands for agricultural production, but they have also engaged in attacks aimed at seizing key sites for drug trafficking and existing or prospective gold mines (e.g., Oakland Institute 2021b).[12] As Shannon Speed (2016) argues, this criminal domination is far from an aberrant scenario in which states and criminal organizations are vying for power; rather, settler states and criminal organizations work in tandem to extract surplus value through activities that subject Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples, and especially Indigenous and Afrodescendant women, to violence. In Nicaragua, the settler state has, on the one hand, collaborated with the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency on militarized operations against drug trafficking (W. I. Robinson 2021); on the other hand, state officials—possibly up to the highest levels of the Nicaraguan government—work in tandem with drug trafficking organizations to move drugs toward their consumers in the U.S. (Expediente Abierto 2021). Across the board, U.S. economic and military imperialism generate vulnerability

to violence and dispossession for Afro-Indigenous peoples, and the Nicaraguan settler state serves as its mediator.

Territory and (Un)Freedom

At the heart of this dissertation is the relationship between territory and freedom. During my research, freedom was salient in the Rama and Kriol communities in at least three interrelated senses. The first two senses of freedom I want to identify are both encapsulated in the concept of autonomy. Autonomy is a highly salient concept across the Afro-Indigenous communities of the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua. The concept arose during negotiations between the first Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) government in the 1980s and the Afro-Indigenous communities of the region on an agreement to end the Caribbean front of the Contra war. The result was a political settlement that included the 1987 Autonomy Statute for the Regions of the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua (Law 28) and constitutional recognition of the communal land rights of Afro-Indigenous peoples on Caribbean coast. Unsurprisingly, Nicaragua's settler state subsequently failed to respect this legalistic form of autonomy (González 2016). Nevertheless, the idea of autonomy has remained highly salient as a political demand and practice on the Caribbean coast because it is lived out in ways that exceed multiculturalist legal regimes. Rather, autonomy resides in the quotidian social practices that provide a foundation for a politics of opposition to capitalist intensification, dispossession, and racialized and gendered violence in the region (Goett 2017, 6).

In its negative sense, autonomy refers to the freedom of being apart from the violence of the patriarchal, mestizo settler colony. Recent scholarship has highlighted the racialized and gendered violence that Black and Indigenous people, and particularly (though certainly not

exclusively) women, face on the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua (Acosta 2020; Barbeyto Rodríguez 2021; Goett 2015; 2017; Morris 2023). This includes the violence from armed settlers, from state authorities often officially involved in anti-narcotics activities, and from drug traffickers operating in the region. As Shannon Speed (2016; 2019) has argued, in the late neoliberal period, settler violence has shifted partially from state violence to formally non-state actors involved in criminal activities, often with the tacit approval and involvement of states. Other forms of violence include racialized incarceration (Morris 2023, 214–15) and the traumas and structural violence that came after the Contra war, bringing on addiction and gendered intracommunal violence (Goett 2017, chap. 2). Freedom, then, includes autonomy from the multiple forms of racialized, gendered violence in the settler colony.

In its positive sense, autonomy refers to the broadest possible form of self-determination both within and across communities (Goett 2017; Morris 2023).[13] In this sense, autonomy on the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua is in many ways comparable to the concept of sovereignty in the context of Native North American nations. That is, it is a complex relationship in which self-determination is both enabled and mitigated by entanglements, interdependency, and contestation between multiple sovereigns: on the one hand, Indigenous or Afro-Indigenous peoples in political communities that have survived the genocidal violence of colonization and, on the other, settler states that claim partial or complete jurisdiction over Indigenous and Afro-Indigenous peoples' territories (e.g., Barker 2005; Bruyneel 2007; Cattelino 2008; Dennison 2012; Pasternak 2017; A. Simpson 2014). Likewise, autonomy on the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua is not typically understood as an absolute form of self-determination; rather, it is a constantly contested relationship that may entail, at different times, apartness, demands, and interdependency.

Finally, many Rama and Kriol people have expressed to me an understanding that wage labor is tantamount to the archetypal form of unfreedom: slavery. In this understanding of freedom, Rama and Kriol people seek freedom from the domination of racial capitalism. That is, they seek to avoid being rendered exploitable in Nicaraguan and global racial formations that have their roots in early intra-European racial ideas that rationalized dispossession and capitalist exploitation of those racialized as inferior (C. J. Robinson 2000; see also Hudson 2016; Koshy et al. 2022).

With these forms of freedom in mind, I am arguing in this dissertation that territory is a relation of freedom in the Rama and Kriol communities. As a first premise, territory is a relation, not a natural or cartographic substance. It exists through the relationships among humans and between humans and the non-human world. It is imbued with material significance through those relationships. I will examine here three ways in which territorial relations are understood, each of which is linked to a form of freedom described above.

First, territory can be a factor of production in the capitalist mode of production. With the enclosure of the commons in Great Britain and elsewhere in Europe, parts of the nonhuman world that had been previously held in common for communal subsistence came to be appropriated by a dominant class. The result was two-fold: First, as an intended result, the lands of the enclosed territory served to produce extraordinary wealth for the dominant landholders. Second, in an unplanned result, the newly dispossessed people who had previously made use of that territory became separated from their means of subsistence, allowing the dominant landholders to use their new wealth to exploit the dispossessed as wage laborers in the nascent capitalist mode of production (Marx [1867] 1977, vol. 1, chaps. 26–29). As Robert Nichols (2020, chap. 2) argues, thinking with both Marx and Native scholars, this original accumulation

could only take place once in this form. In subsequent acts of dispossession, the capitalist mode of production already existed, providing both capital for the act of dispossession and an intended result for those being dispossessed.

Rama and Kriol people are keenly aware of this relationship with territory and the threat it poses to their freedom. In an interview, I asked Tommy, a Rama man in his 30s, about his fears for the future. Tommy is illiterate and from a family of avowed anti-communists—a legacy of the Contra war (Hale 1994; Nietschmann 1986). Yet he had a visceral understanding of the stakes of territorial dispossession in terms that mirror Marx:

> I'm afraid that the same thing that happened up in Kukra River [in the north of the Rama-Kriol Territory] will happen here. We have to work for the Spaniards [mestizos]—be their slaves now. … Now this [land] isn't ours; now we have to be their slaves. It shouldn't be like that. … The people up there in Kukra River used to have it just like how we have it: they had a big piece of land, forested lands, and just the same, the Spaniards divided up their lands. And now they work for the Spaniard people for the whole day for only 100 or 250 córdobas [US$3.00–7.50] per day. That's the *whole day*. We don't want that same thing to happen here.[14]

To lose one's territory means to become a wage laborer, a slave, to be forced to work on one's own territory to produce for another person who acquired that territory by force. To have one's territory, then, is to have the freedom to sustain oneself and not be pressed into slavery.

Second, territory has been conceptualized as a source for place-based thought and political action. This is what Glen Coulthard and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson call "grounded normativity": "the ethical frameworks provided by … Indigenous place-based practices and associated forms of knowledge," which "teaches us how to live our lives in relation to other people and nonhuman life forms in a profoundly nonauthoritarian, nondominating, nonexploitative manner" (Coulthard and Simpson 2016, 254). That is, territory can serve as a relation between humans and the non-human natural world in a particular place and, as such, it can serve as a pedagogical relation to those who are so attuned. An extensive literature addresses

this form of territorial relation, particularly in North America (e.g., Carroll 2015; Coulthard 2014; Gilio-Whitaker 2019; Goeman 2013; LaDuke 1999; L. B. Simpson 2017).[15] While there is immense diversity in how these ethical frameworks are understood across Indigenous and Afro-Indigenous nations, they are unified in their opposition to the exploitative and proprietary relations with territory under the racial capitalist mode of production.

For Rama and Kriol people, this kind of thinking is reflected in an ethical obligation to "mind"—care for—the territory (see also Chapter 3). This obligation came up in interviews when my community collaborators and I asked community members if, and why, they thought the territory belonged to the Rama and Kriol peoples. Repeatedly, both Rama and Kriol people answered that it could not belong to anyone else because the Rama and Kriol people had minded it. They had taken care to sustain the animals there, not overhunting or overfishing. They had not used too much space or cut down too many trees. Now, they mind the territory through their struggle to prevent settlers from destroying the animals, trees, soils, waters, and air.

Third, territory can be a relation of sovereign authority. This concept of territory has its roots in European imperial projects. European legal theorists sought principles that could simultaneously justify the European political domination over spaces in which Indigenous peoples lived without justifying constant warfare over territory within Europe (Anghie 2013; see also Ford 2010, 13; Grovogui 2006, 35–36). They reverse-engineered a solution by constituting sovereignty through the exclusion of Indigenous peoples. "Civilization" was used to separate those who could hold territorial sovereignty and those who could not, but "civilization" was defined racially so as to make it legally thinkable for only European people and for the select few whom European powers found it convenient to recognize as sovereign (e.g., the Miskitu; see Chapter 1). The standards of capacity for territory sovereignty morphed across time and space

(Fitzmaurice 2014; Herzog 2015; see also Wynter 2003). Beyond *capacity* for sovereignty, particular behaviors in relations to territory became associated with possession and sovereignty. For example, Christian missionization (Herzog 2015, 70), settler labor (Cattelino 2018; Fitzmaurice 2014, 24–26), and actions that claimed jurisdiction (e.g., raising taxes or issuing judicial decisions in a particular place) served as factors upon which European and settler courts relied in determining sovereignty. Cartographic technologies reified territorial sovereignty through the flattening of territory into two-dimensional representations (Branch 2014). These explanations of European territorial sovereignty often only existed as post hoc rationalizations for the violent theft of Indigenous peoples' lands (Pagden 2005).

While territorial sovereignty developed as a mode of dispossessing and dominating Indigenous peoples, Indigenous peoples have also claimed territorial sovereignty to protect themselves and their relationships with places amid ongoing settler colonialism. This has been especially common in settler contexts where European imperial powers and their successor states engaged in treatymaking with Indigenous peoples; these treaties have served as legal recognitions of Indigenous sovereignty that predated settler sovereignty and continues to the present day. For example, under U.S. federal Indian law, Indigenous peoples are organized as sovereign nations within the settler nation (Barker 2011). Indigenous studies scholars have conceptualized Indigenous territorial sovereignty as "nested sovereignty" (A. Simpson 2014), "entangled sovereignties" (Dennison 2017), and sovereign interdependency (Cattelino 2008). Through acts of governance and claims of authority and jurisdiction, Indigenous peoples have sought to flip settler rationalizations of dispossession on its head, instead creating spaces for Indigenous survival and territorial relations like those discussed earlier (e.g., Barker 2011; Cattelino 2008; Dennison 2012; Pasternak 2017; Richland 2021; A. Simpson 2014).

While this treaty-based political work has developed primarily in settler colonies of the former British Empire, this dissertation contends that very similar work is taking place in Latin America, including in the Rama-Kriol Territory. Terminology and language differences often obscure these similarities; in Latin America, autonomy (autonomía) often refers to a similar territorial relation for Indigenous peoples in settler states as sovereignty in, say, the North American context (Erazo 2013). Recent anthropological scholarship has demonstrated that Indigenous and Afro-Indigenous peoples in Latin America use acts of governance, direct action, and jurisdictional claims to create spaces of autonomy (Erazo 2013; Goett 2017; Loperena 2023; Mora 2017). In place of the treaties of settler colonies of the former British Empire, many Indigenous and Afro-Indigenous peoples in Latin America have won state recognition of their territorial autonomy, entangled with settler sovereignty, through laws approved after years of struggle, as with Nicaragua's Law 445 (Bretón et al. 2022). These territorial relations became cartographically represented through communal land mapping and counter-mapping practices (Bryan 2011; Hale 2011; Mollett 2011; Offen 2003; Wainwright and Bryan 2009). As in North America, Latin American settler states' recognition of Indigenous territorial autonomy has been inconsistent, riddled with contradictions, and full of political traps for those seeking recognition (Bryan 2012; Hale 2005; Speed 2005).[16] Nevertheless, I pose in this dissertation that Afro-Indigenous peoples in Latin America can and do use territorial recognition, perilous as it is, to build up their sovereignty through a whole array of tactics, including both state processes and extra-legal direct action.

In each of these senses, territory means freedom for the Rama and Kriol communities. Amid capitalism, territory provides a means of subsistence outside of the racialized exploitation of wage labor. Amid alienation and atomization, territory is a relation where Rama and Kriol

people can be in community with each other and the non-human world. Amid racialized violence and domination in Nicaragua and the world, territory is a space for autonomy and relative safety. Recognition of Afro-Indigenous territory from the Nicaraguan settler state has not, and structurally cannot, afford Afro-Indigenous people this freedom because it assumes the underlying sovereignty of a settler state, the existence of which is premised upon Afro-Indigenous dispossession for the sake of settler capitalist accumulation (see also, e.g., Coulthard 2014). Given this impossibility, this dissertation examines Rama and Kriol people's practices that seek to conjure territory. These practices are, then, practices of freedom. They are practices of freedom for the Rama and Kriol people, and they are also practices of freedom for all people who would seek to live in a world that is just and habitable.

Collaborative Knowledge Co-Production

This dissertation is the product of nearly ten years of episodic, activist research with the communities of the Rama-Kriol Territory. Over ten months in 2014 and 2015, I conducted an ethnography of the decade-old governance institution that the Rama and Kriol communities had established after the passage of Nicaragua's Law 445: the Rama-Kriol Territorial Government (GTR-K). The GTR-K was originally designed to prepare a request for the state to issue a communal land title for the Rama-Kriol Territory. After the anthropologist Jennifer Goett introduced me to several community leaders by email, I arrived at the GTR-K headquarters in Bluefields: a one-story, cement building painted green and white with eight small offices, a kitchen, bathrooms, and an auditorium. A metal placard on the front of the building identified the Danish government as the funder of the building. By the time I arrived, the office had five

administrative staff and half a dozen paid technical staff mostly made up of elected community leaders.

The Grand Interoceanic Canal project was top of mind for most in the office. The leaders there were simultaneously pursuing consultations with community members about their feelings on the canal, conversations with the central and regional governments, lawsuits against the canal concession law, and advocacy with international organizations. I supported this work by drafting communications, translating documents between English and Spanish, and connecting with international journalists. At the start, I was far more focused on this activist work than on my research, which little resembled the project I had proposed to undertake before the central government announced that the canal would pass through the Rama-Kriol Territory. Through this participant-observation, I gradually learned how the GTR-K operated. New questions began to arise in my conversations in the GTR-K office. Why did the territorial title and Indigenous and Afrodescendant rights laws not prevent the government from pursuing the canal project through the proper legal channels? How was this new institution—the territorial government—working to prevent or shape the canal project?

At first, I was developing a research methodology on the fly that combined activism and participant-observation. I occasionally felt a sense of guilt over the degree to which GTR-K leaders and staff were guiding my research questions and approaches, as though this undermined the objectivity that I thought I was supposed to pursue in ethnographic work. Sitting with this discomfort, I eventually came across literature on activist methods, particularly in the work of Charles R. Hale (2006b; 2008) and Shannon Speed (2008a). I realized that my political commitments to the Rama and Kriol communities had led me into a project that could also produce high quality research. Hale and Speed, among others, describe the explicit use of activist

methods as a mode of producing situated knowledge in collaboration with communities. That is, the explicit statement of the researcher's perspective and collaborations with the communities allows the reader to better understand the possibilities and limitations of the knowledge that has been produced. These methods can also produce better knowledge because they integrate the expertise of the communities at every stage of the research process, include generating research questions, designing the research methods, conducting the research, and analyzing data.

While I embraced activist methods in my research for this dissertation, I did not do so in an absolute way. Following Jemima Pierre (2008) and Jennifer Goett (2017, 17–22), my community-collaborative approach leaves room for me to at times prioritize research areas that may not be at the top of the agenda for the majority of community members (without contradicting their stated interests) and sometimes involves me siding with community members with minority perspectives. For example, my use of the term Afro-Indigenous did not emerge from the communities' own use; instead, I use it to as a mode of ethnographic refusal to make public the areas of intercommunity conflict between Rama and Kriol communities (see A. Simpson 2014). Instead, I discuss these issues only within the communities to avoid advertising areas where state and private actors could take advantage of internal divisions in the communities.

After completing my first research stint in 2014–15, I continued on to doctoral research over the course of fifteen months between 2018 and 2023. Moving on from my work in the Rama-Kriol Territorial Government office, I focused on two Rama-Kriol communities that were particularly interested in ethnographic research on their governance and dispossession: the Rama community of Indian River and the Kriol community of Greytown. When I arrived there in 2018, community leaders put me to work for them as I had previously worked for the territorial

government. I also learned to participate in the everyday tasks of communal life: cooking, fishing, cleaning agricultural plots, harvesting, gossiping, traveling, caring for children, building homes, and celebrating and mourning life events. This research is rooted in feminist ethnographic methods, which break down boundaries between the colonial ideal types of a politicized, masculine public sphere and a supposedly apolitical, feminine private sphere. That is, activities associated with a feminized private sphere are at least as important to the political projects of the communities as the explicitly political activities associated with a masculinized public sphere (see Goett 2017; Mora 2017).[17] My research consisted of participant-observation, semi-structured and unstructured interviews, oral history interviews, and archival research in the Institute for Nicaraguan and Central American History in the Central American University in Managua. I conducted oral history interviews, which serve as the basis for Chapter 3, with a team of Rama and Kriol researchers who contributed to the design and execution of the research. Following the completion of major research in 2022, I returned in February 2023 to present preliminary findings in meetings open to all community members in Indian River and Greytown. Due to funding and time constraints, it was not possible for me to make a full dissertation draft available for the communities' review prior to submission; this will be pursued for future publications emerging from this dissertation.

Note on Language Use and Names

The act of converting ethnographic research—even activist and decolonizing research—into written work inevitably entails representational and translational violence. I want to preface the chapters of this dissertation with a brief description of the choices I have made in an attempt to minimize this violence. If nothing else, I hope that discussing these choices openly will allow

readers, especially from the Rama and Kriol communities, to understand the limitations of this dissertation.

First, I am forced to make choices on how to represent and translate the words of Rama and Kriol people. Rama and Kriol people primarily speak two English-based creole languages (see Assadi 1983; Holm 1983). These languages have no standardized orthography, but I transcribe their words using an orthography based on standard U.S. English. In creole languages, there are varying dialects that are closer or further from the superstrate language (in this case, English; Bickerton 1975). Many speakers use a dialect with me that, in my view, is clearly intelligible to a U.S. English-reading audience as transcribed. In those cases, I provide the speaker's words as I transcribed them with minimal edits and bracketed replacements or explanations for individual words or phrases that may not be obvious to a U.S. English-reading audience. At times, though, lexical and grammatical divergences between the languages and U.S. English make intelligibility sufficiently difficult that I choose to translate the speaker's words into something resembling my own English. In those cases, I provide my original transcription in an endnote. Many interviews were also conducted in Spanish. I provide my translations in the text and offer the original Spanish in endnotes.

Second, I have had to make a series of difficult choices on the use of real names, pseudonyms, or the omission of names altogether. In recent years, anthropologists have reckoned with the discipline's traditional use of pseudonyms and its potential for limiting anthropologists' accountability to those who are left unnamed (Weiss and McGranahan 2021; see also Throop 2014). At the same time, at least one of the reasons for using pseudonyms—the risk of reprisals from the state or other actors—is very real in this case, as described above. In line with my broader methodology, I discussed these issues with community members and originally put the

decision in their hands. Roughly half requested pseudonymity or anonymity for their own safety; others requested that I use their real names.

However, in the year after I filed this dissertation, Nicaraguan government forces escalated their persecution of Black and Indigenous people perceived to oppose the government. Community members who had originally requested that I use their real names contacted me to request that I give them pseudonyms. I contacted community leaders about this issue, and we agreed that it would be best for me to replace all real names with pseudonyms except when describing public behavior by public figures and in very rare other cases. Where real names are used, I provide both first and last names. Where pseudonyms are used, I only provide a first name. I am grateful to the UCLA Division of Graduate Education for facilitating the process of retroactive redactions to protect the safety of Rama and Kriol community members. The scenario described here warrants further reflection and analysis in discussions of name use in ethnographic research products.

Sketch of the Dissertation

This dissertation is divided into two sections. The first section (Chapters 1 and 2) examines the historical construction of structures of colonialism and imperialism in the Rama-Kriol Territory and Nicaragua more generally. The second (Chapters 3, 4, and 5) consists of an ethnographic view into Rama and Kriol resistance to these structures.

In Chapter 1, "Conceptualizing Settler Colonialism in Nicaragua," I examine the formation and endurance of the Nicaraguan settler colony. First, I review the growing literature on settler colonialism in Latin America. I propose that the settler colonialism analytic sheds light on the structural nature of dispossession and anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism in Nicaragua,

and the Nicaraguan case can also help us conceptualize settler colonialism as both highly flexible and transnational. The rest of the chapter is divided into geographical sections in order to analyze the emergence of the modern settler state in Nicaragua through the histories of Pacific Nicaragua, the former Mosquitia (modern-day Caribbean Nicaragua), and the shifting borderlands between these regions.

Chapter 2, "The United States, International Institutions, and Imperialism in the Conjuring of Afro-Indigenous Territories," focuses in on the actors beyond Nicaragua that are implicated in the production of territorial relations in southeastern Nicaragua—whether as Afro-Indigenous territories or as zones of extraction. The chapter focuses particularly on the United States government, international judicial and human rights bodies, international non-governmental organizations, and international financial institutions. I argue that the sovereignty of the settler state in Nicaragua is mitigated by the sovereignty of international entities, which are today advancing a globalized settler sovereignty in Nicaragua. At the same time, I highlight the disjuncture in the interests of international actors and the settler state, which allows Rama and Kriol people to pit one against the other and thus create space for their own construction of authority.

Chapter 3, "Narrating Rama-Kriol Political Thought: Oral Histories of Indian River and Greytown," draws on more than 80 oral history interviews conducted with my co-authors from Indian River and Greytown. The chapter begins with histories of Rama and Kriol life prior to 1979, continues with accounts of the triumph of the Sandinista Revolution and the Contra war (1979–1990), and concludes with the construction of renewed Rama and Kriol life in the area (1990–present). I identify several key themes, including episodic engagements with racialized wage labor, memories of fleeing scarcity for the abundance of Indian River and Greytown, and a

strong emphasis on the ethical responsibility to "mind the territory." This serves as a key basis for Rama-Kriol belonging in the communities' political thought.

In Chapter 4, "Contesting Consultation: Nicaragua's Grand Interoceanic Canal and the Limits of Recognition," I analyze the process through which the Rama and Kriol communities and the Rama-Kriol Territorial Government contested the Grand Interoceanic Canal project. The chapter focuses on the internationally recognized duty of states to consult with Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples on projects that will affect them. The Nicaraguan settler state used multiple techniques to evade the duty to consult or minimize the opportunity for Rama and Kriol people to reject the canal project, some of which constrained the Rama-Kriol Territorial Government's authority more broadly. I argue that the legal contestation of the canal that centered on the duty to consult ultimately weakened inter- and intra-community solidarity, which had been key to past struggles against infrastructural megaprojects in the territory.

Finally, Chapter 5, "'We Have to Look Solution Weself': Vigilance and Jurisdiction in the Rama-Kriol Territory," provides an ethnographic examination of Rama-Kriol tactics for resisting dispossession. I focus in on vigilance, and especially a community forest ranger program, which has served as a dominant tactic for the struggle against dispossession at the hands of mestizo settlers. I argue that vigilance is a bivalent tactic; community members simultaneously use it to pursue political horizons of settler state recognition and resurgent Rama-Kriol sovereignty. It is a tactic that demonstrates the political creativity of the communities and the importance of territorial belonging as a source for Rama-Kriol political action.

The throughline of these chapters is my two-pronged argument regarding the production of territorial relations in southeastern Nicaragua. First, Rama and Kriol people face racial capitalist imperialism mediated through Nicaragua's settler state, resulting in dispossession and

the loss of freedom. Second, Rama and Kriol people resist this dispossession through creative political practices that build their authority, jurisdiction, and sovereignty. In the conclusion, I reflect on the stakes of the Rama and Kriol peoples' work to build sovereignty and, alongside similar communities around the world, to create a livable future on this planet.

Notes

[1] The spellings *Kriol* and *Creole* both refer to the Afrodescendant people of Nicaragua's Caribbean coast. Though *Creole* is the much more commonly used spelling both within and outside Nicaragua, I use *Kriol* throughout this dissertation to remain consistent with the formal name of the territory and community with which I work most closely: the Rama-Kriol Territory and the Kriol Community of Greytown. I only use *Creole* when referring to a neighboring community and territory that has formally adopted that spelling: the Black Creole Indigenous Community of Bluefields.

[2] Given that I was both physically present for many of the events at the center of the dispute *and* I was a researcher with expertise on Rama and Kriol politics, I was called as a sort of hybrid fact witness (testigo) and expert witness (perito). In the hearing, the IACHR referred to me as a witness (testigo); nevertheless, both the petitioners and the respondents addressed my qualifications as an expert. I discuss the politics of (expert) witnessing and expertise in this case in Chapter 4.

[3] I developed this concept in one of many conversations with Sonya Rao in which she elicited clear statements of my theoretical contributions in the dissertation. I am indebted to her for having picked up on the idea and brought me back to it as I worked on this project.

[4] See, for example, Jessica Cattelino (2010), Jean Dennison (2012), Mishuana Goeman (2013), J. Kēhaulani Kauanui (2018), Paul Nadasdy (2017), Shiri Pasternak (2017), Justin Richland (2021), Audra Simpson (2014), and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017).

[5] Forests in legally recognized collective lands are estimated to contain 24 percent of global tropical forest carbon (Rights and Resources Initiative, Woods Hole Research Center, and Landmark 2016). Indigenous peoples' territories (legally recognized or not) have been estimated to hold roughly 80 percent of global biodiversity (Fa et al. 2020; Garnett et al. 2018).

[6] Thank you to Jennifer Goett for helping me clarify these ideas and pushing me to keep this section rooted in ethnography.

[7] For example, the formal name of the Kriol community in the city of Bluefields, Nicaragua, is the Black Creole Indigenous Community of Bluefields (Comunidad Negra Creole Indígena de Bluefields). Also see Edmund T. Gordon's (1998) descriptions and analysis of Kriol shifts toward Indigenous identification in the 1990s.

[8] This is not meant to flatten the diversity of Black experiences in the hemisphere. There are also examples of participation in, and inheritance of, settler colonial projects. See, for example, the descriptions of nascent arrivant colonialism in the Mosquitia in Chapter 1 and the work of Shona Jackson (2012) on Guyana.

[9] As Edmund Gordon (1998), Karl Offen (2002; 2010), and Baron Pineda (2006) have noted, identities are highly fluid in many Miskitu communities, with Indigeneity and Blackness each coming to the fore in different moments.

[10] The history of the Rama-Kriol Territory and its peoples has been told by scholars ranging from chauvinistic European ethnologists to structural functionalists and community-collaborative ethnographers. Without

differentiating between these perspectives, the following is a list of works primarily focusing on the Rama and Kriol peoples: Eduard Conzemius (1927), Jennifer Goett (esp. 2006), Eugenia Ibarra Rojas (2014), Adolfo Constenla Umaña (2014, with Ibarra Rojas), Walter Lehmann (1920), Franklin O. Loveland (1975), Gerald Mueller (2001), and Gerald Riverstone (2004). Snippets of Rama-Kriol history can also be found in broader historical works by Tomás Ayón ([1882] 1977), Jaime Incer Barquero (2002), Karl Offen (1999; 2015), and Caroline Williams (2013).

[11] On the value and limitations of the term "vulnerable," see Shannon Speed (2019, 2–3). With Speed, I would prefer the term "vulnerada," or "made vulnerable."

[12] Drug trafficking is a key factor in the colonization of the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua and Honduras (Devine et al. 2020). This begins from the region's geographical role as a trafficking site. In the jungles and coastal areas of the Caribbean region, cocaine can be trafficked, stored, and—critically—recovered after being dumped from boats and aircraft and washing westward (Expediente Abierto 2021). Cattle ranching and gold mining provide an opportunity for money laundering in the region, leading to what Kendra McSweeney terms "narco-deforestation" (McSweeney et al. 2014). Meanwhile, state officials deem Afro-Indigenous peoples on the Caribbean coast racially suspect in drug trafficking, leading to state violence against some of these communities (Goett 2011; 2015).

[13] Yet, as Courtney Desiree Morris notes, a different concept of autonomy has also remained a salient in Sandinista discourses. In this version, autonomy is coterminous with the FSLN plan for the Caribbean coast, and it is something that is granted to the coast by the goodwill of the FSLN central government under President Daniel Ortega and Vice President Rosario Murillo (Morris 2023, chap. 6).

[14] See "Note on Language Use and Names" below. The original transcript is as follows: "Me afraid because me no want make it happen like the, say, how Kukra River happen. We have to work for the Spaniard them, be slave for them now. … This thing no mi for we; now we have to be slave to them. That no can't be like that. … People up there Kukra, they used to de just like how we de: get big land, woodland, and same, [the Spaniard] them mark up them land now. And now them work *whole day* for the Spaniard people, [for] just 100 or 250 córdobas a day. *Whole day* that now. And that we no want make it happen same here."

[15] This vision articulates, albeit uncomfortably, with that of Arturo Escobar (e.g., 2008), Walter Mignolo (e.g., 2011), and Catherine Walsh (e.g., 2007). These self-identified decolonial scholars have correctly identified place-based Black and Indigenous ethical frameworks in Latin America, yet they also tend toward exoticizing and reifying these "others" in the process of converting these ethical frameworks into intellectual commodities stripped of their relation to actual anti-colonial action (see Rivera Cusicanqui 2012).

[16] In North America, the literature on the risks of state recognition for Indigenous peoples is immense, including the work of Glen Coulthard (2014), Jaskiran Dhillon (2017), and Audra Simpson (2014).

[17] While the gendered public/private sphere division exists in ideal types in white supremacist capitalist patriarchy (hooks 2000), I do not mean to indicate that this is a universalized division. Its salience varies significantly across the communities discussed in this dissertation and the work of Jennifer Goett and Mariana Mora.

Chapter 1: Conceptualizing Settler Colonialism in Nicaragua

Introduction

In this bicentennial decade of Latin American independence from Spanish colonial rule, the structural nature of colonial domination in those states has come to the fore. Decades have now passed since Indigenous and Afrodescendant social movement mobilization opened a period of constitutional reforms that recognized multicultural rights (Paschel 2016; Van Cott 2000; Yashar 2005). Communal land rights have been legally recognized through internationally funded titling programs throughout Latin America, culminating in the titling of more than 200 million hectares to Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples (Bryan 2012). Yet this "territorial turn" (Offen 2003) has failed to guarantee Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples' physical control of the titled territories (Buntaine, Hamilton, and Millones 2015; Fabricant and Postero 2015; Finley-Brook 2016). This phenomenon raises the question of whether there are underlying factors preventing these interventions from having their intended effects.

As anthropologist Shannon Speed has declared, "Latin American states are settler colonial states" (2017, 783).[1] Speed argues, in short, that Latin America underwent a process in which settlers came and stayed; in which settlers stole Indigenous land and forced Indigenous and Afrodescendant people to work the land for the settlers' benefit; and in which settlers claimed sovereignty to the exclusion of Indigenous and Afrodescendant sovereignty. This chapter gestures at the power of this approach to reveal political entanglements, constraints, and horizons in ethnographic studies of Nicaragua, including the failure of existing policy interventions to result in protections of Indigenous and Afrodescendant lives, territories, and freedoms. In Nicaragua, an autonomy regime for the heavily Indigenous and Afrodescendant Caribbean coast region was established in 1987, and nearly a third of the country's landmass has

been titled to Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples as communal lands. Nevertheless, settlers—including both individual and corporate actors—continue to enclose these communal lands with immense violence. I argue that the settler colonialism analytic reveals that Indigenous and Afrodescendant dispossession in Nicaragua is embedded in historical and global continuities. At the same time, employing the settler colonialism analytic in Nicaragua can visibilize an expanded and globalized concept of settler colonialism that makes clear the interconnections between settler colonialism and imperialism around the world.

I begin this chapter with a brief review of the social scientific literature on race, ethnicity, and settler colonialism in Latin America, exploring how settler colonial racecraft[2]—with anthropologists of Latin America as key collaborators—has obscured the structure of settler colonialism. The following section analyzes the Nicaraguan context, delving into the histories of colonization on the Pacific coast, the Caribbean coast, and along the frontier between the two. The third and final section of the chapter discusses the potential implications of understanding Nicaragua, and Latin American states more broadly, as settler colonies. One critical implication of this conceptual shift, I argue, is that the settler colonialism analytic makes thinkable certain political horizons of Indigenous and Afrodescendant movements that have been sidelined in academia and international institutions during the multiculturalism era. The era of neoliberal multiculturalism, as Charles R. Hale has described it (2005; see also Speed 2005), has been characterized by state recognition of multicultural rights when made legible within logics of cultural difference, neoliberal governmentality, and acceptance of settler state sovereignty. By contrast, the settler colonialism analytic provides a direct solution: decolonization.[3] Indeed, on the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua, there is an ongoing history of sovereignty-based Indigenous and Afrodescendant movements that have sought total decolonization of the region since it was

first annexed by Nicaragua. This ethnographic reality hints at the continued importance of anticolonial solidarities across Abya Yala and beyond.

I. Race, Ethnicity, and Settler Colonialism in Latin America

Over recent decades, a growing literature in Native studies, anthropology, and related fields has provided insights into two hegemonic projects of white supremacist modernity that have often been obscured with the complicity of social scientists. Studies of settler colonialism and Indigenous survivance have revealed the erasure of both Indigenous people(s) and indigeneity. This takes place as part of a structure in which the continued theft and occupation of Indigenous lands enriches settlers and permits the functioning of global capitalism. Meanwhile, in Latin America, social scientists have foregrounded an analysis of race where ethnicity and culture had previously dominated. This challenges the century-long ideological and material project of hegemonic mestizaje,[4] which purported that most of the continent had been—or would inevitably become—homogenized as part of 20th century projects of nation-building. In this section, I review the confluence of these literatures in the interest of coupling their revelations. This allows for an understanding of how 20th century Latin American racecraft has further obscured the structure of settler colonialism.

From the invasion of Abya Yala until the rise of scientific racism in the 19th century, ideas of race in Latin America, though unsettled, facilitated the emergence of settler colonialism. A well-rehearsed historical account of the emergence of race in Latin America notes that while the Spanish and Portuguese empires had considered African slavery categorically permissible on the basis of a supposed refusal of Iberian religious authority from the early 15th century, the permissibility of Indigenous slavery in the Americas was debated at the highest levels of Iberian

government through the mid-16th century, including in the famous debates between Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda and Fray Bartolomé de las Casas (Wade 2010, 24–27). Meanwhile, the variable treatment of people of 'mixed' Spanish and Indigenous descent in Peru during the early colonial period as Spanish, Criollo, and/or Indian has led Marisol de la Cadena (2005, 265) to conclude that mixedness was widely tolerated and privilege was allocated more along the lines of nobility in both societies than any fixed racial grounds.

Outside of such illustratively exceptional cases, colonization generally led to genocidal treatment of African and Indigenous peoples across Latin America, though there was significant variation. In the southern Mexican and Central American highlands, for example, Indigenous peoples were typically forced into colonial labor regimes—though not legally enslaved—on their own lands (Díaz Polanco 1997, 23–64; Kramer 1994, 199; Speed 2019, 20–21). In present-day western Nicaragua, on the other hand, Indigenous peoples were rapidly enslaved and sent to areas of the Spanish Empire where labor was in greater demand, while the viceroyalty brought in enslaved Africans to their former homelands later on (Kinloch Tijerino 2012, 54; J. Wolfe 2010, 178). Still, between the invasion and the late 18th century, categories of whiteness, indigeneity, blackness, and mixedness congealed even as racializable characteristics remained indeterminate. In general, Indigenous and Black people in Latin America were slotted into distinct categories: Spanish and Criollos were supreme, if distinct; Indigenous people were to be converted and paternalistically 'protected' as they were removed from their lands and exploited in slave-like conditions; Black people were straightforwardly subject to forcible control and exploitation; and people of 'mixed' descent were subject to a wide range of racializations that could be based on faith, social status, and phenotype (de la Cadena 2005, 264–66; Wade 2010, 26).

The divergences of this history from colonial racecraft in North America have contributed to the obscuring of a settler capitalist mode of production in Latin America. Speed (2017; 2019, 18–19) argues that the settler colonialism analytic has only rarely been applied to Latin America in part because of dogmatic interpretations of Patrick Wolfe's formulation of settler colonialism. Wolfe (1999) argues that settler colonialism entails a land-labor binary in which Indigenous peoples are eliminated so as to dispossess them of their lands and a laboring population is introduced by settlers to extract resources and generate surplus value on those lands. Speed shows that this binary needs only a slight modification to fit the Latin American context "because colonialism in much of Latin America has in fact been characterized by both land dispossession and labor extraction, to which indigenous peoples were simultaneously subjected" (2017, 784). This aligns more with Bernard Magubane's (1989) conceptualization of settler colonialism in South Africa: a structure in which settlers remove Indigenous peoples from their territory so that both the territory and the Indigenous peoples can be exploited. The territory is converted into a factor of production, and the Indigenous peoples are removed from their means of subsistence in their territory and forced into wage labor. Still, in regions of Latin America like western Nicaragua and much of Brazil and Argentina, the land-labor binary played out similarly to what Wolfe described in North American settler colonial contexts: the elimination of Indigenous people so as to dispossess them of their lands and the replacement of their labor with enslaved Africans. More important than the specific means by which settlers acquired land and labor is the fact that settler colonialism is, in Wolfe's (2006) classic formulation, a structure rather than an event. "Unlike metropole or administrative colonialism imposed in other parts of the world, in Latin America white Europeans came to stay. And stay they did" (Speed 2017, 785; Gott 2007).

Aside from the land-labor binary, social scientific scholarship that overemphasizes the nation-state and reinforces hegemonic ideas about race in Latin America have also obscured the structure of settler colonialism. Against the backdrop of the biologized racism of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Boasian anthropological research minimized the salience of race in Latin America until the past few decades.[5] Critical to the erasure of race was the ideological work done by Mexican anthropologist Manuel Gamio, a student of Franz Boas whose ideas on national identity would eventually become dominant. In his widely read work of the revolutionary period, *Forjando patria*, Gamio all but explicitly recognized the settler nature of the Mexican state. He noted the divide in Mexico between what he described as eight to ten million Indigenous people and four to six million people of European descent, arguing:

> …we even find certain analogies between that situation and that of the former southern African republics—countries where the nation was always represented by those of European origin, leaving the Indigenous people relegated to servitude and passivity. … The separation, the divergence of these two great social groups existed not only during the Conquista and the Colonial Period, but became even deeper during contemporary times, as Independence—it must be said once and for all without hypocritical reservations—was carried out by the group of European tendencies and origins and brought freedoms and material and intellectual progress to that group, leaving the Indigenous group abandoned to fate… (1960, 9–10).[6]

Gamio's prescription for this settler domination was a nation-building project, proposing mestizo identity—that is, the mix of Indigenous and European ancestry—as the core of the emergent nation. He suggested that "indigenous education would wipe away the vices and cultural deficiencies of Indians" (de la Cadena 2005, 273; see also Díaz Polanco 1997, 4–5). That is, Gamio believed that Indigenous differences from the economically and politically powerful criollos and mestizos were rooted in cultural differences, rather than biologized racial differences, and could be erased through education and intentional cultural mixing. This served as the orienting purpose of the Inter-American Indigenist Institute, which he directed for 18 years

in the mid-20th century. Gamio's ideas rapidly spread south, reaching Nicaragua in the early 1930s via Augusto César Sandino and Central American Unionist thinker Salvador Mendieta (Gould 1998, 155–62). The development of hegemonic mestizaje (Euraque, Gould, and Hale 2005; Hale 2002) permitted scholars and political elites in countries where it took hold to dismiss race as a divisive vestige of racial science and eugenics while claiming that all were formally equal and able to access the same status through education.

Hegemonic mestizaje has served as a form of racecraft that obscures the racial capitalist project of settler colonialism in Latin America. Jemima Pierre developed the concept of racecraft, a portmanteau of race and statecraft,[7] to clarify the ways in which the colonial state in present-day Ghana worked to institutionalize racial ideologies such that they became hegemonic and served the colonial state's project of rule. Specifically, the colonial state racialized Black Ghanaians as both Black and as 'native' members of 'ethnic' and 'tribal' groups. The colonial state ruled indirectly through the incorporation of a class of mediators—a ruling elite of each 'tribal' group—into the colonial state, demanding that this class adopt certain European norms. This technique of rule made it appear that the primary tension was not between white colonial rulers and Black colonial subjects, but between members of tribes and their rulers. "In this sense," Pierre argues, "*indirect rule was a racial project*" (2013, 19)—a racial project that deployed race to obscure race and cement white supremacist rule.

Though quite different in its operation, hegemonic mestizaje similarly serves as racecraft. Its advocates formed institutions that promoted the incorporation of indigeneity into national identity, demanding that Indigenous people and mestizos alike approximate whiteness in salient areas of cultural politics in exchange for citizenship. At the same time, this form of white supremacy would be obscured through the recasting of the nation as culturally mestizo. This

transformation would aim to make the settler mestizo and make the mestizo a settler. Further, by casting the problem as a divide between the white and the Indigenous, the project of hegemonic mestizaje would erase or exclude Blackness. The precise functioning of this form of racecraft in Nicaragua will be seen in the following section.

Gamio's project of racecraft through hegemonic mestizaje was tied up with a broader nationalist project within the Boasian anthropology of that era. As Mark Anderson has shown, Boas himself viewed Latin America—Mexico and Brazil in particular—as key examples of racial arrangements developed through miscegenation that weakened social distinctions along the lines of race (2019, 77–79). This analysis supported his stance that miscegenation was the optimal solution to racial conflict within the United States. Boas was fundamentally concerned with social integration into the nation-state, and this, in turn, was premised on the assumption that assimilation would take place into the white, settler nation-state. "This of course meant that Blacks could assimilate only by becoming biologically more white; they could not assimilate *as* Blacks" (Anderson 2019, 79). Boas thus proposed to emulate Latin America's ostensible success in reducing the sociopolitical salience of race within the bounds of the nation-state through racial mixing. Many of his successors through midcentury would similarly look to Latin America as a case of limited racial conflict (Anderson 2019, 129–30).

Hegemonic mestizaje—that is, of the sort proposed by Gamio—obscures the structure of settler colonialism through its proposition that Indigenous people may be included in citizenship regimes as the legal equals of settlers in exchange for assimilating into mestizo national identity. As research over the past three decades has repeatedly shown, mestizaje only masks the white supremacist structure of Latin American settler societies, which continue privileging whiteness

and politically and economically excluding phenotypes perceived to be linked to Indigeneity and Blackness (Moreno Figueroa 2010; Moreno Figueroa and Saldívar Tanaka 2016; Telles 2014).

Among anthropologists who accepted the story that hegemonic mestizaje in Latin America told about itself, two alternatives to race became dominant in studies of social difference: ethnicity and culture. Peter Wade traces ethnicity through three meanings: first, indicating a 'pagan' or 'heathen' group through its etymological origin in the Greek *ethnos*; second, primarily in the 19th and early 20th centuries, meaning a supposedly biological group below the level of a race in terms of distinctiveness; and third, as a highly ambiguous concept employed by anthropologists in the mid-20th century to avoid the biological/phenotypical connotations of race (Wade 2010, 15). In a review of challenges to the hegemony and ambiguity of ethnicity in anthropology, Faye V. Harrison (1995) identified the elisions present in the study of ethnicity and concluded that race is either smuggled into or ignored in these approaches to ethnicity. As Brackette Williams proposed,

> *[E]thnicity* labels the politics of cultural struggle in the nexus of territorial and cultural nationalism that characterizes all putatively homogeneous nation-states. As a label it may sound better than tribe, race, or barbarian, but with respect to political consequences, it still identifies those who are at the borders of the empire (1989, 439).

She would later describe the type of hegemony manifested in mestizaje as a Gramscian 'transformist hegemony,' wherein homogenization need not be total. Rather, those ethnicized as distinctive from the dominant group "lack the political and economic power necessary to insist on a redefinition of what are ideologically defined as the core or the central ingredients of" the dominant, "putatively homogeneous brew," and dominated groups' "new cultural products are either excluded from or absorbed into the homogeneous brew in ways that do little to reduce their marginalization" (B. F. Williams 1991, 31). Ethnicization thus transmutes the overt domination of white supremacist racialization into a more obscured ideological struggle within

the same structures of oppression where all differences are supposedly mutable if ethnicized subjects would only assimilate. As Jemima Pierre (2013, 202–5) argues in the context of Ghana, the anthropological focus on local ethnic or 'native' identities—often imposed as a technique of divide-and-rule governance by colonial powers—makes the context of global white supremacy, capitalism, and patriarchy invisible, preventing an analysis of the broader terrain in which domination is exercised (see also Beliso-De Jesús and Pierre 2020).

Culture has served a similar and overlapping role in the obfuscation of racial oppression. Anthropologists have employed Boasian and Geertzian culture concepts to demonstrate the mutability of certain human traits that were at one point predominantly seen as bio-racially determined within anthropology. Yet the boundedness of Boasian and Geertzian culture concepts has allowed for them to become racialized at the same time that their proponents claim to conducting race-free analyses (Beliso-De Jesús and Pierre 2020; Harrison 1995; Mullings 2005; Visweswaran 1998). As the Boasian culture concept fed the rise of multiculturalist policies in Latin America since the early 1990s, the compatibility of multiculturalism with racial and settler colonial oppression has also become clear. Liberal multiculturalism disavows the structures of gendered, white supremacist settler colonialism that allow for the establishment of the very settler state that implements multiculturalist policies. This form of multiculturalism treats those who dominate the state and international state system to be unmarked, 'tolerating bodies' (Brown 2006, 45) while further entrenching the hegemony of liberal 'rationality' (Povinelli 2002, 8). As Speed (2005) and Charles R. Hale (2006a; 2011), among others, have noted, multiculturalism can convert radical, anti-racist, and anti-colonial demands for territory and autonomy into decontextualized and delimited claims for state recognition that fit with a neoliberal push for

"restructuring society such that people come to govern themselves in accordance with the tenets of global capitalism" (Hale 2006a, 75).

The dominant tendencies in the anthropological study of ethnicity and culture in Latin America have made settler colonialism less visible as the structuring principle of dominance and oppression in the region. By making always already racialized markers of ethnicity and culture appear mutable, these concepts of ethnicity and culture facilitate the kind of transformist hegemony that Williams describes as simultaneously acknowledging difference, promoting homogenization, and reinforcing the dominance of the unmarked dominant group—in this case, white and mestizo settler elites. They also make indigeneity thinkable only as a set of culturally or ethnically distinct practices while erasing the specific racial configuration of Indigenous dispossession and Indigenous and African slavery in Latin America that constituted the key elements of settler capitalist accumulation. Multiculturalism is a particularly dangerous form of this erasure. It advances a formal, state recognition-based regime as a mode of ostensibly promoting justice for Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples while necessarily conceptualizing the settler state as the recognizing entity.

In short, independence from European colonial rule did not mark the end of settler colonial domination in Latin America; it only served to transmogrify it into a less visible force within the trappings of the nation-state. Colonialism in Latin America is thus not simply a vestige of the explicitly colonial period from the invasion until independence from Spain, as suggested in concepts of "internal colonialism" (e.g., González Casanova 2009) and the "coloniality of power" (e.g., Quijano 2007), among others (see Speed 2019, 22). These concepts take Latin American states' independence to be a first step toward decolonization simply because

settlers cut off European rule. The structure of settler colonialism in fact remains in place, now firmly and formally dominated by the settlers themselves.

II. Settler Colonialism in Nicaragua

Settler colonialism in Nicaragua has taken on diverse forms over time and across its geographies, but its structural persistence remains clear. This section analyzes these forms of settler colonialism in both western Nicaragua and the Caribbean coast region. I analyze them separately due to their markedly different histories before describing the history of the frontier between the two of them. This section is necessarily brief and incomplete for the purposes of this chapter, though many volumes have been written on the historical substance I am discussing. My purpose here is to explore the continuities and interpretations that emerge from these histories when viewed with the settler colonialism analytic in mind.

Western Nicaragua

The Spanish-colonized Pacific region of the country exhibits clear features of settler colonialism. In all of present-day Nicaragua, there were an estimated 800,000–1,000,000 inhabitants immediately prior to the Spanish arrival in 1522 (Kinloch Tijerino 2012, 38). Of those, around half a million Indigenous people were estimated to live in the western portion of present-day Nicaragua, around 200,000 in the central highlands, and some 40,000 in the Caribbean coast region (Newson 1987). There was a high density of linguistic, cultural, and political diversity, especially in the western reaches of the country where many groups had migrated from present-day Mexico during the seven centuries prior to colonization (Kinloch Tijerino 2012, 19–20). In a 1581 survey of the western region that had once been home to

500,000 Indigenous people, fewer than 16,000 people were counted in total, reflecting a combination of brutal warfare and local slavery by the Spanish, the arrival of European diseases, and the enslavement of some 200,000 Indigenous people who were sent to other reaches of the Spanish Empire (Kinloch Tijerino 2012, 52–54). Those Indigenous people who had survived the genocide were concentrated in reducciones and subjected to the encomienda system described above. Despite the immense oppression of this period, Indigenous communities in western Nicaragua retained some degree of political autonomy through to the formal independence of Central America from Spain in 1821 (Kinloch Tijerino 2012, chap. 3).

After the genocidal near-extermination of Indigenous peoples in Nicaragua, growing industries in the province—including cacao, cattle, lumber, indigo, mining, and shipbuilding (Kinloch Tijerino 2012, chap. 5)—led the Spanish settlers to bring thousands of enslaved Africans to replace Indigenous labor. Though the precise number of enslaved Africans imported to Nicaragua is not known, by the late 18th century, people of African descent accounted for a slim majority of the total population of Spanish-controlled Nicaragua. After the abolition of slavery, Afro-Nicaraguans continued to face subjugation, leading to two categories of strategies described by Justin Wolfe: "whitening or passing and race-based community formation" (2010, 178). Neighborhoods and towns in different parts of the country were defined by their populations' African descent, and this granted a political identity to those communities. That is, one's relations to an Afrodescendant community could at times be more important than phenotype in terms of defining race in the late 18th and early 19th centuries (e.g., J. Wolfe 2010, 184). To strive for improved life chances meant to either struggle as part of one's community or, for those able to pass, to abandon that community and seek inclusion in white settler society. Wolfe demonstrates that many leading Liberals of the mid-19th century came from Black

communities—especially the city of León's neighborhood of San Felipe—and sought a disavowal of race in Nicaragua's settler society. Specifically, these Black Liberals sought formal equality for all ladinos—that is, non-Indigenous people—to the exclusion of Indigenous people, who were at that point viewed as outside of settler society and, at least in the case of Indigenous people of the Caribbean coast, incapable of civilization (J. Wolfe 2010, 184–85). In short, a form of Liberal (and liberal) race-blindness emerged in this time period and competed with the Conservatives' racial exclusivism and overt white supremacy for hegemony in settler state politics.

In the early 20th century, settler erasure of indigeneity advanced in Nicaragua amid a new wave of Indigenous dispossession and the arrival of the hegemonic form of mestizaje—for which Gamio had advocated in Mexico—in Nicaragua. Jeffrey Gould (1998) traces the dismantling of Indigenous communal lands and institutions across western and central Nicaragua in the late-19th and early-20th centuries, arguing that this was associated with the rise of the myth of a homogenously mestizo Nicaragua. Very rough demographic data indicates that somewhere between 40 and 70 percent of Nicaraguans were considered by data collectors to be Indians between the late 18th century and 1900; by 1920, census takers only classified four percent of Nicaraguans to be Indians (Gould 1998, 16–17). This points to both the disruption of the politically autonomous communities that defined indigeneity up to the turn of the 20th century—including the theft of their land bases by Nicaraguan and foreign elites—and the shifts in settler racecraft.

Building on the liberal race-blindness that had been advocated in the late 19th century, hegemonic mestizaje arrived in Nicaragua by the 1920s, erasing the presence of Indigenous peoples, their land rights, and their political futures (Gould 1998), in addition to the total erasure

of African descent and Blackness (J. Wolfe 2010). Gould argues that unlike the form of hegemonic mestizaje in Mexico, which praised abstract indigeneity as strengthening the nation and simultaneously subjugated Indigenous people, the Nicaraguan discourse of mestizaje by 1950 had "posited that Indians had ceased to exist at some forgotten time in the deepest recesses of historical memory" (1998, 167). This was the result of a double-bind akin to that described by Jessica Cattelino (2010) in the U.S. context. In the hegemonic discourse, indigeneity was constituted by cultural difference and a lack of civilization. To be an Indian, according to this discourse, was to resist assimilation. That opened up a logic of dispossession: to be deemed an Indian was to be deemed wasteful with one's land and stubborn in the face of national progress, therefore justifying state intervention to privatize communal lands. On the other hand, Indigenous communities like Sutiaba were accused of being too assimilated, too educated, to be eligible for any form of political autonomy, which justified abolishing their political institutions and authority over communal lands (Gould 1998, 48–49, 76). Of course, in practice, those communities deemed to be too assimilated still faced overt anti-Indigenous racism (Gould 1998, 123). Within this discourse, there was no way to both be Indigenous and to have political autonomy and communal lands. Gould shows that some Sutiabas—especially those who had attended schools—at least partially accepted this logic, demonstrating the incorporative dimension of Nicaraguan racecraft. Although Sandinista forms of hegemonic mestizaje valorized indigeneity as a sort of primordial source for politics opposed to imperialism and large landholders, they joined the Mexican form of hegemonic mestizaje in valorizing only abstract forms of indigeneity. This extinguished the possibility of seeing a future for autonomy of specific Indigenous peoples and instead motivated efforts at cultural, economic, and political assimilation.

Nicaraguan political projects of both the left and the right during the past half-century have relegated Indigenous peoples to symbols of historical resistance and nation-formation while their dispossession continues (Alianza de Pueblos Indígenas y Afrodescendientes de Nicaragua 2017; Gould 1998; Saldaña-Portillo 2003). Even so, the projects of Indigenous dispossession and settler sovereignty have not been completed in western Nicaragua, as demonstrated by the continued political salience of Indigenous communities like Sutiaba and Monimbó in resistance to both the Somoza military dictatorship and the current Ortega-Murillo regime. The National Council of Indigenous Peoples of the Pacific, Center, and North of Nicaragua, among other organizations, continues advocating for the recognition of communal land rights and political autonomy for these Indigenous peoples, posing a renewed and potentially counterhegemonic challenge to settler sovereignty and dispossession.

The Caribbean Coast

Unlike Pacific and central Nicaragua, settler colonial dispossession on the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua—a region constituting approximately half of Nicaragua's present-day territory—was trivial until the final decades of the 19th century. From no later than the early 17th century until the early 19th century, this region—then known to outsiders as the Mosquitia or the Mosquito Coast—was dominated by several interconnected groups of the Indigenous and Afro-Indigenous Miskitu people.[8] The Miskitu held significant sway along the Caribbean coast from the Yucatán to western Panama (Offen 2015). While the Spanish Empire claimed the region as part of Nicaragua and the General Captaincy of Guatemala, it was unable to enslave, convert, or militarily defeat the region's Indigenous peoples. Spanish expeditions to the region repeatedly

failed to establish durable occupancy of territory due to successful resistance from the Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples of the region.

By the early 18th century, the Indigenous Miskitu people in the region entered into diplomatic and commercial relations with Great Britain. A Miskitu leader was recognized by the British as king of the Mosquitia, and other Miskitu groups were separately recognized by the British as having leaders of subordinate ranks (Gordon 1998, 34). Great Britain established a superintendency in the Mosquitia and maintained extensive commercial relations with the Miskitu through several settlements and visiting vessels (Baracco 2019). The settlements—scattered and small, with minimal plantation agriculture—typically consisted of an elite class of Europeans and people of mixed ancestry, a small class of free Black and Indigenous people, and a majority of enslaved Black and Indigenous people (Gordon 1998, 35; Offen 1999, 276–79). Outside of the settlements themselves, larger land grants from Miskitu leaders to settlers were typically located on or beyond the frontier of Miskitu political control; indeed, Karl Offen argues that Miskitu leaders used land grants to settlers as attempts to bring additional lands under their control (1999, 291–92). Miskitu forces took part in raids of neighboring Indigenous communities and Spanish settlements, both as mercenaries for the British and of their own volition (Offen 1999, 336–42). Recent scholarship indicates that British settlers were largely at the mercy of Miskitu leaders, depending on their protection and goodwill amid a lack of direct British government investment in settlement (Offen 2015). Settlers in the Mosquitia and in British colonies in the Caribbean were also dependent on the Miskitu for labor. Slaving of Indigenous people—the Rama, Mayangna, Ulwa, and Kukra peoples of the Caribbean coast, but also Indigenous people captured from central Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala, Costa Rica, Panama, and beyond—was a large component of Miskitu commerce with Europeans. Thousands of

enslaved Indigenous people were sent around the Mosquitia and to British colonies as far as Jamaica and Virginia (Offen 2015, 48–49).

Great Britain maintained treaty relations with the Miskitu from 1670 until 1783, when the Peace of Paris following the U.S. Revolutionary War recognized Spanish sovereignty and required the evacuation of all British subjects from the region. When the evacuation was finally enforced in 1787, with the departure of 537 free people and 1,677 enslaved Indigenous and Afrodescendant people (Goett 2006, 127), a period of intense conflict erupted among different Miskitu groups. In the end, the Afro-Indigenous Zambo Miskitu emerged as the dominant group and successfully expelled the former British superintendent—who had defected to the Spanish—from the region (Gordon 1998, 36; C. A. Williams 2013). A period of relative autonomy followed this conflict as Spanish efforts at colonizing the region subsided.

Despite the Peace of Paris and the evacuation, the United Kingdom resumed official relations with the Miskitu king in 1837, appointing a superintendent for the region and declaring a protectorate in 1844 (Baracco 2019, 20–22). With the abolition of formal slavery by 1841, the southern town of Bluefields became a population hub for Afrodescendant Creoles—many of them formerly enslaved in the Mosquitia, San Andrés, Providencia, and elsewhere in the Caribbean (Goett 2006, 157–58). The confluence of the British return and this growing Creole population set in motion a political transformation that culminated in an emergent form of what Jodi A. Byrd (2011) terms arrivant colonialism—that is, the people brought by force to the Americas as part of the European project colonization enacted a form of colonization through their incorporation into that project (see also Jackson 2012). Under the influence of the British consul in Bluefields, the newly crowned Miskitu king in 1845 formed a council of state—a new legislative body that the consul proposed to "modernize" the Mosquitian government—that

consisted exclusively of two white men and five elite Creoles (Gordon 1998, 41). This council instituted English law in the Mosquitia and sought to open it up to further settlement and resource extraction (Gordon 1998, 43–44), though the council's influence, especially in the northern reaches of the Mosquitia, appears to have been quite limited (Goett 2006, 197).

The collapse of British military strength after the Crimean War and growing U.S. interest in the construction of a canal across Nicaragua and the Mosquitia led the United Kingdom to cede underlying sovereignty in the Mosquitia to Nicaragua in the 1860 Treaty of Managua (Olien 1987). Despite the U.K. having always previously claimed that Mosquitian sovereignty resided in the Miskitu, not British, monarch (*Daily News* 1856), the Miskitu king and council of state played no direct role in the treaty negotiations; Miskitu sovereignty was simply ignored. This was the culmination of a lengthy period in which the U.S. had pressured the U.K. to replicate the settler colonialism of North America in the Mosquitia. For instance, in an 1854 exchange between James Buchanan, then the U.S. secretary of state, and the British foreign secretary, Buchanan argued, "Nicaragua should treat the Mosquitos within her limits as Great Britain and the United States treated their own Indians." Toward that end, he proposed setting aside a territory for the Miskitu "until their title was extinguished by Nicaragua" and, with respect to titles granted by the kingdom, employing the *Johnson v. McIntosh* Supreme Court decision. That decision, Buchanan said, confirmed "the law of all European nations since the discovery of America ... [that] such grants made by Indians were absolutely void" (*Daily News* 1856). Ultimately, this invocation of settler colonial dispossessive logics—even in a region that was still far from a settler colonial reality—succeeded in establishing a legal foundation for the gradual elimination of formal Indigenous sovereignty.

By the 1870s, settler and arrivant colonial dispossession began playing a more significant role in the daily lives of Indigenous and Black residents of the Caribbean coast. The Treaty of Managua led to the establishment of a Mosquito Reserve in the region, which was to provide for limited self-governance under the rule of a Miskitu hereditary chief and a council of government that was dominated by Black Creole elite in the Caribbean port town of Bluefields (Gordon 1998, 42). The Nicaraguan government soon began violating the Treaty of Managua by issuing land titles in the region (Olien 1987). Even after an 1881 arbitration decision by Emperor of Austria decided that only the hereditary chief of the Miskitu could issue titles (Emperor of Austria [1881] 2007), Nicaraguan titling to individual settlers and companies escalated in the 1880s and 1890s as U.S. fruit companies took a growing interest in exporting bananas and coconuts (Goett 2006, 205–6). The contradictions of this situation culminated in the Nicaraguan government's 1894 military annexation of the Caribbean coast and termination of the Mosquito Reserve with naval support from the U.S. (Gordon 1998, 60–62). Nicaragua's then-president, José Santos Zelaya, renamed the region after himself, declared Spanish the official language, closed all English-language schools, named a New Orleans businessman the mayor of the regional capital of Bluefields, and issued titles for vast swathes of the region to his family members, military officers, political allies, and investors from the U.S. and Europe (Gordon 1998, 62–66). Land titles issued by the Mosquitia and the Mosquito Reserve were annulled, and, when not immediately retitled, were considered national lands that were open to be colonized by and titled to western Nicaraguans and foreigners (Goett 2006, 206–9). U.S. businesses—centered around the fruit companies—came to dominate the regional economy, employing residents and hiring workers from the British West Indies to work on the plantations (Gordon 1998, 66–69). As U.S. banks financed Nicaraguan sovereign debt over the following decades, they effectively

guaranteed that U.S. companies' interests would be protected (Hudson 2017). This contributed to the U.S. occupation of Nicaragua (1911–1934) and the subsequent Somoza family military dictatorship (1937–1979). In the latter period, the U.S. enclave economy of the region was supplemented by internationally supported colonization projects along the frontier. This transition marked the true arrival of settler colonialism in the region and will be discussed at length below.

Along the Frontier

The frontier of settlement in Nicaragua describes a shifting geographical space that remains politically salient. For much of the history of Nicaragua since the beginning of colonization, the frontier was a zone that contained both brutal colonial conflicts and agency for Indigenous peoples in a border area between two polities: settler Nicaragua and the Mosquitia. In the mid-16th century, the frontier of Spanish settlement ranged from the Matagalpa communities of the north-central highlands to the Ulwa communities in the mid-central hill and the Votic (likely proto-Rama) communities of the southeastern jungles along the San Juan River. In the mid-16th century, brutal attempts at forming encomiendas in the central highlands among the Matagalpa were met with rebellions and flight into the mountains to the east (Offen 1999, 133, n. 16); the attempts generally failed as a result of these actions (Romero Vargas 1995, 252–53). Four centuries later, after a wave of settler land theft in 1900s and 1910s, up to a quarter of all Indigenous people in Matagalpa—some 8,000 people—fled east into the former Mosquitia (Gould 1998, 54–55). Indigenous people also fled west into Spanish-controlled areas to escape conflicts with the Zambo Miskitu polity and its slaving expeditions. Indigenous people fleeing from the Zambo Miskitu were recorded as arriving in the Matagalpa area in 1730 (Romero

Vargas 1995, 222). The Indigenous people of Boaco appear to have chosen to separate from the Ulwa people whose descendants now live in Karawala on the Caribbean coast and lived with some degree of autonomy under Spanish rule, receiving a royal title to their lands in 1765 (Gould 1998, 76–77; Romero Vargas 1995, 219). Sixty-five enslaved Ulwas, Kukras, and Africans fled from Bluefields to Spanish-controlled territory in 1775, eventually making their way to the colonial capital of Granada (Romero Vargas 1995, 232). Likewise, numerous Ramas fled from slavery at the hands of Europeans and Miskitu on the Caribbean coast toward Spanish settlements further inland during the 18th century (Romero Vargas 1995, 264–69). Of course, the Zambo Miskitu also traveled west on their raiding and slaving expeditions, even raiding Granada itself. My point in recalling these episodes is to highlight the instability of state power in the region. This frontier could be considered a shatter zone in which those escaping domination—specifically, Indigenous people escaping settler colonization in the west and enslavement and Miskitu domination in the east—could find refuge.[9]

This frontier served as a shatter zone for nearly four centuries until a qualitative shift in the eastward movement in the mid-20th century. Beginning in the 1950s, settler colonialism on the Caribbean coast transitioned from relatively small numbers of large-scale landholders in a plantation-based U.S. enclave economy to a frontier model of mass quantities of mestizo settlers migrating further and further from inland areas toward the Caribbean. This resulted directly from the Somoza dictatorship's model of employing the Caribbean coast as a safety valve for mestizo and Indigenous smallholder dispossession in the Pacific and central regions due to land seizures for cotton cultivation and cattle ranching, as well as several natural disasters (Morris 2016, 359; Riverstone 2004, 62; Vilas 1990, 133).

This process was not merely a natural consequence of forcibly displaced people seeking out lands; rather, the Somoza dictatorship received international support for opening the frontier to settler colonialism. As the World Bank promoted export agriculture as Nicaragua's path to development in the 1950s, international development experts wrote reports describing settlement as a technical solution to limited lands (cf. Mitchell 2002): the eastern half of Nicaraguan territory was occupied by only ten percent of the population and was not sufficiently 'productive' of the monocrops and livestock needed for export agriculture (Vilas 1990, 132–35). The Somoza regime proposed land reform—under the motto "Neither men without land, nor land without men" (Instituto Agrario de Nicaragua 1967)—and received support from the Inter-American Development Bank to relocate displaced people from the Pacific and central zones into settlements on the Caribbean coast (Kaimowitz 1996). Those settlements would eventually become major cities and agricultural hubs from which further waves of colonization have subsequently extended. Meanwhile, between 1960 and 1983, some sixty percent of all World Bank loans to Central America were for cattle ranching (Bermúdez et al. 2015), an activity that exacerbated migration from the Pacific coast by depleting aquifers and contributing to several decades of worsening droughts (C. de Castro 2016). After the 1979 Sandinista revolution, the Contra war brought intense conflict to the Caribbean coast, and the subsequent right-wing government settled war refugees and ex-combatants—the vast majority of whom came from the Pacific and central regions—in Caribbean coast "Development Poles" (Romero 2018). As of 2023, mestizos form demographic majorities across the Caribbean coast region, and monthly reports of attacks and massacres arrive from besieged Indigenous and Afrodescendant communities. Mestizo settlement continues to intensify, steadily but unevenly, throughout the Caribbean coast, making subsistence increasingly difficult for the colonized communities.

Connecting the Regions: A Settler Colony and Its Frontier

This historical account of three regions of Nicaragua paints a picture of the contemporary structure of settler colonialism in the country. A settler structure was installed in western Nicaragua early in the process of colonization through the genocide of Indigenous peoples, seizure of their lands, and use of enslaved or otherwise unfree Indigenous and Afrodescendant labor on those lands. On the Caribbean coast, centuries of Miskitu domination limited settler incursions and dispossession until the rise of an emergent form of arrivant colonialism, the region's formal annexation to Nicaragua, and the development of a U.S. enclave economy under coercion from a military occupation and financial pressure from U.S. banks. The frontier zone between these two regions, long a shatter zone where Indigenous and Afrodescendant people could escape domination, took on the form of a more traditional frontier of settlement with the intervention of international development funds under the Somoza regime.

III. From Multiculturalism to Sovereignty-Based Political Horizons

A diagnosis of settler colonialism in Nicaragua opens an analytical window to political forms and horizons that have been sidelined during the multiculturalism moment in Latin America over the past thirty years. The diagnosis of settler colonialism calls for a prescription of literal decolonization (Tuck and Yang 2012). The analytical frame of settler colonialism proposed in this chapter makes visible the contingent, historically specific reach of settler sovereignty, from its genocidal beginnings to its precarious expansion and its ongoing movement to erase remaining gaps. Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples navigate those gaps in their struggles against dispossession and erasure. Those struggles constantly reinforce the idea that the

project of settler colonialism and the reach of settler sovereignty are far from complete and could still be turned back.

The Latin American liberal multiculturalist turn in recent decades was yet another mode of settler domination and has suffocated certain political avenues and horizons. Specifically, proponents of liberal multiculturalism assume the stance of the settler state, as made clear in slippages like the use of the first-person plural in discussing who will be granted multicultural recognition.[10] From the outset of multicultural policies, the terms of debate are set by the settler state, which enshrines the "enlightenment obligation to public reason (critical rational discourse)" (Povinelli 2002, 8) and rules out claims that fundamentally challenge liberal rationality and the state's role in policing it. Further, it establishes the dominant group in a given state as the "tolerating body" that determines what is tolerated and what is excluded by the limits of multiculturalism (Brown 2006, 45). Lastly, it means that it is the settler state that determines how recognized 'cultures' are constituted, which may result in the policing and exclusion of certain identities that are determined to be impure, hybrid, or threatening (Brown 2006, 45; Hernández Castillo 2016, 17–21; Hooker 2009; Muehlmann 2013; Rivera Cusicanqui 2012).

Specifically, proponents of liberal multiculturalism adopt a white/unmarked racial identity and an imperial mode of domination. Although it is intrinsic to liberalism to disavow the conditions of its own formulation, liberalism emerges from the project of empire and necessarily contains the stance of paternalistically and coercively forming its Others into appropriate colonial subjects (Mehta 1999, 7–18). This often includes an insistence upon maintenance of European imperial modes of patriarchy and the 'protection' of women and children from deviations from that particular form of patriarchy (Brown 1995, chap. 6; Mehta 1999, 11). As Sylvia Wynter (2003) has argued, enlightenment theorists have transformed the definitions of

those who are considered to be free and empowered—from the Christian man to the 'rational'/economic man to the biologized-as-white/economic man—while maintaining the constitutive exclusion of those who are marked as colonized/female/irrational. Under liberal multiculturalism, it is the marked, recognized 'culture' that fits into this exclusion from dominance and control of the state. It is thus unthinkable within liberal multiculturalism that a 'cultural' group being recognized would itself determine what is to be tolerated within its own group, much less that a practice of the white/unmarked dominant group might be "marked as *barbaric*" (Brown 2006, 190).

On Nicaragua's Caribbean coast, the liberal multiculturalist regime of the last three decades has emphasized highly limited territorial autonomy and special political rights under the Nicaraguan constitution and Laws 28 and 445.[11] This has come at the expense of political alternatives that challenge settler sovereignty at its core. Longstanding movements for restoring the sovereignty of the Mosquitia—whether in the form of independence from Nicaragua or less-than-independent nationhood—have continued to exist alongside the political struggles formally recognized by the liberal multiculturalist regime (Baracco 2018; Gaitán-Barrera and Azeez 2015; Hale 2005). In my ethnographic research in the Rama-Kriol Territory, I have seen that these movements have been pushed to the margins as communal and territorial governments have been bestowed with recognition and funding from the settler state and international institutions and non-governmental organizations. Still, even many communal and territorial government leaders express a belief that sovereignty serves as the basis for their rights and claims—and that sovereignty is the horizon of their struggles. This finding of the coexistence of seemingly contradictory ends and means, beliefs and silent acceptances, is hardly novel—Speed (2008b) describes such rights claims in Chiapas as "rights in rebellion," and Hale (2020) has analyzed

strategies that "use and refuse" the spaces within liberal multiculturalism. My point is that an analysis of settler colonialism can help make sense of the specific embrace of sovereignty-based discourses and strategies against the violence, dispossession, and domination of the settler state.

Literature on Indigenous sovereignty amid the settler colonies of North America is illustrative of the forms of contestation that are already taking place in Nicaragua. Building on the conceptualization of tribes as nations-within-nations in literature on U.S. federal tribal law (e.g., Barker 2011), humanistic and social scientific studies have described the relationship between Indigenous and settler sovereignties as "nested sovereignty" (A. Simpson 2014), "entangled sovereignties" (Dennison 2017), and sovereign interdependency (Cattelino 2008). Likewise, in Nicaragua, Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples—organized in communities, communal governments, territorial governments, political parties, social movements, etc.—have continued to assert their sovereignty and autonomy. Part of this comes through the quotidian practices of governance in their territories, including settling disputes, collecting rent from individual settlers and businesses, and collaborative projects with environmentalist non-governmental organizations, as in the Rama-Kriol Territory.[12] Other strategies may include direct action and legal approaches that create space for these practices of governance. Ethnographic research in the multiculturalism era has pointed out the occasional usefulness—sometimes in lifesaving ways—of working through settler multiculturalist regimes amid other counterhegemonic and anti-colonial strategies (Goett 2017, 8, 81; Hale 2020; Ybarra 2018, 123). Social intimacy and the often feminized forms of work that enable these practices of governance and resistance are also central to the construction and maintenance of sovereignty (Goett 2017; Mora 2017).

Taken as a whole, these multiple strategies make up a political project that far exceeds the confines offered by the multiculturalist settler state, instead challenging the very foundations of settler sovereignty. Researchers ought to attend to them as such. Particularly in a moment of instability in the liberal multiculturalist model in Nicaragua and the broader region (Hale and Mullings 2020), it is crucial that analysts understand the coming political directions taken by states in the context of the structure of settler colonialism. The settler colonialism analytic points to the settler state's structural incapacity for granting anti-colonial and anti-racist claims. Only decolonization—an end to the *global* projects that maintain structures of settler colonialism—can bring a definite end to the violence, dispossession and domination that Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples in Nicaragua have faced in its many forms over the past five centuries.

Notes

[1] See also the contributions of M. Bianet Castellanos (2017), Juan Castro and Manuela Lavinas Picq (2017), Christopher A. Loperena (2017), Lourdes Gutiérrez Nájera and Korinta Maldonado (2017), and Baron Pineda (2017) to the same pathbreaking issue of *American Quarterly* on settler colonialism in Latin America. Richard Gott (2007) has also argued that Latin America is a settler colony and emphasized the importance of this framing in understanding white Latin American racial anxieties. Speed (2019) has further expounded the structure of settler colonialism in Latin America and advanced her concept of settler capitalism in her study of Indigenous women's migration across multiple settler colonies.

[2] The concept of racecraft, as further explained below, comes from Jemima Pierre's *Predicament of Blackness* (2013).

[3] Calls for decolonization in the face of settler colonialism are, of course, widespread both within and beyond academic contexts. For but one influential articulation of the demand, see Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang's (2012) article on the subject.

[4] Mestizaje is the term for the category or project of mestizo-ness.

[5] As Faye V. Harrison notes, this entailed both a shift toward a 'no race' perspective among anthropologists in the dominant center of the discipline *and* the subjugation of those anthropologists—often anthropologists of color—who have continued to study race (1995, 48).

[6] Translation by the author. The original reads: "…hasta hallamos cierta analogía entre esa situación y la de las exrepúblicas sudafricanas, países en los que la nacionalidad estuvo siempre representada por la población de origen europeo, quedando relegados los indígenas a la servidumbre y a la pasividad. … La separación, la divergencia de esos dos grandes grupos sociales existió no sólo durante la Conquista y la Época Colonial, sino que se hizo más honda en los tiempos contemporáneos, pues la Independencia, hay que decirlo de una vez sin reservas hipócritas, fue

hecha por el grupo de tendencias y orígenes europeos y trajo para él libertades y progreso material e intelectual, dejando abandonado a su destino al grupo indígenas…."

[7] Barbara J. Fields and Karen E. Fields (2014) have used the term "racecraft" to refer to the witchcraft-like qualities of race as it operates in society. I do not explicitly explore this dimension of race in this chapter, though I acknowledge its conceptual value.

[8] Historical studies of the region have long pointed to the salience of the distinction between the Tawira (Indigenous) and Zambo (Afro-Indigenous) Miskitu, both among them and, perhaps to a greater degree, among European visitors (e.g., Gordon 1998, 33–35; Offen 1999, chap. 5). While there was certainly a great deal of mixing between Indigenous Miskitu and Afrodescendant people over the course of Mosquitian history, John Thornton (2017) has reconstructed some of the specific ways in which the 1636 arrival at Cape Gracias a Dios of several hundred enslaved Africans—specifically, a group of Mbwila soldiers who had been captured by Portuguese forces the year prior—likely reshaped Miskitu society and forged the Zambo Miskitu group.

[9] Here, I am specifically thinking of James C. Scott's use of the term to refer to places "where the shards of state formation and rivalry accumulated willy nilly, creating regions of bewildering ethnic and linguistic complexity" (2009, 7), but also see Robbie Ethridge's (2009) use of the term and Ben Raffield's (2021) review of archaeological uses of the term.

[10] See, for example, Charles Taylor's (1992) use of the first-person plural in *Multiculturalism and "The Politics of Recognition."*

[11] This liberal multiculturalist has deviated into near unrecognizability under the Ortega regime, but the foreclosures and erasures of the liberal multicultural moment largely remain.

[12] Compare this with the case of the Rukullakta territory in Ecuador, where Juliet Erazo (2013) describes struggles to "enact sovereignty."

Chapter 2: The United States, International Institutions, and Imperialism in the Conjuring of Afro-Indigenous Territories

Introduction

Nicaragua is well studied as an object of United States imperialism, and this dissertation is contributing to an understanding of Nicaragua as a settler colony. But how can the interplay of settler colonialism and imperialism be understood in a settler colony of the Global South like Nicaragua? What role does this interplay have in the conjuring of Afro-Indigenous territories? This chapter, building on the historical account provided in Chapter 1, examines the role of the United States government and international institutions in the conjuring of territory in Nicaragua. I begin with a review of U.S. economic imperialism in Nicaragua since the early 20th century. This leads into an examination of a set of key international actors in the process of recognizing Afro-Indigenous territories in Nicaragua: the Inter-American Human Rights System, United Nations organizations, international financial institutions (IFIs), development banks, and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs). These institutions pressured Latin American states to recognize Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples' territorial claims and, in many cases, funded the demarcation and titling process (Bryan 2012; Hale 2005; 2011; Offen 2003). That role was well-studied up through the issuance of titles, but their place in the post-titling period is less understood.

This chapter also aims to provide an ethnographic understanding of the collective effects of these institutions' work on Nicaragua's Caribbean coast. While this dissertation focuses primarily on the Rama and Kriol peoples' responses to the colonization of their lands (e.g., Mayer 2019), this chapter turns to a more nebulous set of external actors shaping the practices and imaginaries of territoriality through legal decisions, grantmaking, and capital investments.

These actions are part of what I term conjuring territory. The chapter provides an account of four sets of actors and institutions: first, the United States government; second, international judicial and human rights bodies; third, international NGOs; and fourth, IFIs and development banks. I argue that each of these sets of institutions are participants in a global white supremacist order. As interlocking elements of that order, they jointly assert the underlying sovereignty of the settler state and its international allies in Indigenous and Afrodescendant territories. At the same time, I note that several of these institutions have meaningfully contributed to Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples' territory-conjuring projects. International institutions do not present anti-colonial openings for Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples and their territories, but they have, in certain cases, created possibilities for Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples to strengthen their own projects of territorial conjuring.

In this chapter, I develop a two-fold argument. First, I demonstrate that U.S. and Global North imperialism toward Nicaragua combine with Nicaragua's existing structure of settler colonialism to produce what I term fractally recursive colonialism. This is a form of colonialism in which relationships of domination are reproduced at different scales. If U.S. imperialism is a reproduction of the violent, settler colonial relationship between settler and Indian at a global scale (see Byrd 2011), U.S. imperialism also insists on the reproduction of this relationship within the settler colonies it subjugates. This operates through ideological projects, as with the export of white supremacist racial ideas from the U.S. to Nicaragua by way of Mexico that served as the roots of hegemonic mestizaje, as discussed in the last chapter. It also operates through capital flows from international financial institutions and development banks that are channeled according to these ideological projects in order to extract surplus value from the Global South and import it to the Global North. To put it another way, the U.S. and Global North

use sovereign debt as a cudgel to require extraction in the Global South and provide ideological tools to rationalize settler colonialism as a tool of that extraction.

Second, I argue that the present political conjuncture for Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples in Nicaragua reflects a shift in frontier logics brought about by a shift in imperial relations. In the previous period of neoliberal multiculturalism (roughly 1990–2015; see Hale 2005; Speed 2005), international financial institutions pushed states like Nicaragua to take up Afro-Indigenous demands for territorial recognition as an opportunity to clarify land tenure for investment and limit recognition to spaces with little value for capitalist extraction (Hale 2011). This allowed for the opening of new settler colonial frontiers where more risk-averse settler capitalists could be assured that their land-based investments would be safe from Indigenous and Afrodescendant claims. This operated through the state's recognition of only delimited territorial rights—for example, territories usually omitted urban areas—and of Indigenous and Afrodescendant communal governments that could be pressured to sign rental agreements with capitalists. While this might appear to be a more peaceful process than that of the forcible seizure of territory that has characterized the colonial period, the neoliberal multiculturalist state has often outsourced the violence of colonization to criminal organizations, yielding what Shannon Speed (2016) calls "neoliberal multicriminalism."

As neoliberal multiculturalism has given way—albeit unevenly—to white supremacist, authoritarian retrenchment in the Americas (Hale and Mullings 2020), the settler colonial frontier logic has shifted again. Now that territories have been titled and territorial governments formed, IFIs have largely abdicated their role as financiers of limited Indigenous and Afrodescendant territorial recognition—but they continue demanding that Global South states service their debts and generate profits for Global North corporations. In Nicaragua, this has essentially yielded a

return to the frontier logic that preceded the neoliberal multiculturalism era: a logic in which Afro-Indigenous peoples may have any of their lands expropriated by individual settlers, firms, or the state. While this may appear to be a dramatic shift from the dominant multiculturalism of the previous era, it is in fact a continuation of settler colonial dispossession that merely targeted a different frontier and changed tactics during the neoliberal multicultural period. This chapter describes the contributing role of the U.S. and international institutions in this frontier logic as they demand growth and sovereign debt payments. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 provide ethnographic description of its results and Rama-Kriol resistance to it.

Studying the status of Indigenous and Afrodescendant territoriality within the bounds of the local, and even within states, obscures the global phenomena that shape this territoriality. Questions of scale and the appropriate units of analysis for understanding ethnographically observable phenomena in colonial contexts have previously been addressed by Bernard Magubane (1971) and Brackette Williams (1989), both of whom underscored the need to understand these phenomena in their global contexts (see also Beliso-De Jesús and Pierre 2020). This chapter is an attempt to take up Magubane's and Williams's proposals by beginning with a local phenomenon, drawing out its global linkages, and studying those linked elements ethnographically.

In doing so, I am also endeavoring to understand the international linkages of settler colonialism. Speed argues that there is a "dual theoretical gap": "theorizations of the settler state (largely elaborated in the north) have not grappled fully enough with neoliberal capitalism, and theories of the neoliberal state (a primary focus in the south) fail to recognize the significance of settler logics that structure the conditions of state formation" (2017, 784). This chapter joins the literature seeking to fill this gap by understanding settler colonialism as a hemispheric and global

enterprise and seeing racial capitalist relations in Latin America as tied up with settler colonialism, both locally and globally. As J. Kēhaulani Kauanui (2016) and Alyosha Goldstein have insisted, the study of settler colonialism must not obscure linkages with colonialism of other varieties, slavery, and other linked phenomena. Key in this chapter is that settler colonialism in one context—say, North America—may generate the capital, infrastructure, ideological projects, and imperialist relations that are necessary to invest in and advance settler colonialism in another context: Nicaragua.

In one sense, the case I am studying here supports the contention of critics of multiculturalist policies in settler colonies: that these policies provide a veneer of liberal tolerance while ultimately reinforcing the settler state as the underlying sovereign (Brown 2006; Coulthard 2014; Povinelli 2002). The Nicaraguan state's recognition of Indigenous and Afrodescendant territories has only reinforced the sovereign authority of the settler state to determine who will be recognized as an appropriate territorial representative and what the limits of this territoriality are (Mayer 2019; see also Lund 2011, 886). At the same time, this chapter highlights the interplay of legal recognition and sovereignty in countries subjected to international institutions' interventions. In the case I am examining here, the Nicaraguan settler state's sovereignty has long been undermined by IFIs and their private bank predecessors acting on behalf of the United States and allied governments (e.g., Hudson 2017; Walker and Wade 2011). IFI support for the territorial turn is part of this history. In this sense, imperialist settler states like the United States reinforce their own authority—and the authority of global white supremacy (see Pierre 2013)—when they support IFIs that push Nicaragua to recognize Indigenous and Afrodescendant territorial rights. They reinforce the global projects of white

supremacy, settler colonialism, and racial capitalism when they successfully push for the recognition of these territories.[1]

The conclusion of this chapter raises the prospect that these simultaneous moves by IFIs and the Nicaraguan state to consolidate authority may open a space for Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples to conjure territory by pitting settler states and international institutions against each other. This chapter examines the role of international institutions in one region, but it suggests the importance of a more holistic examination of how Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples in countries subjected to imperialism may use contestation between settler states to build their own authority in their territories (and beyond).[2]

United States Imperialism and Fractally Recursive Colonialism

The relationship between the U.S. and Nicaragua is one in which U.S. governments dating back to the 19th century have sought to influence or control Nicaraguan policymaking for the sake of U.S. material and geopolitical interests. This has entailed a combination of military and economic mechanisms with debt and violence—or threats of violence—at their core. The result has been to increasingly entangle the Nicaraguan and U.S. economies such that surplus value extracted from enclosed land and wage labor in Nicaragua is largely appropriated by U.S. capitalists.

In the 19th century, U.S.–Nicaragua relationship was closely linked with transportation across the Central American isthmus and agricultural exports (Gobat 2005, 55–58; Wheelock Román 1979, 14–17). In addition to fruit, lumber, and rubber exports from the Caribbean coast, Nicaragua exported coffee from the central highlands to the U.S. While the U.S. had supported Nicaraguan President José Santos Zelaya in annexing the Mosquito Reserve in 1894, Zelaya

eventually became a threat to U.S. interests when he limited concessions to U.S. businesses and pursued foreign investment in a proposed canal to compete with the newly built Panama Canal (Gobat 2005, 69–70). In 1909, U.S. sailors and marines landed in Bluefields and later Corinto on the Pacific coast, supporting a rebellion that ousted Zelaya (Gobat 2005, 70). Over the following three years, the U.S. brought to Nicaragua its broader policy of promoting loans from U.S. commercial banks to Latin American governments—to the point that Wall Street bankers registered a new, de facto national bank for Nicaragua in Connecticut (Hudson 2017, 154–56). When the unpopularity of U.S. domination contributed to a new rebellion in 1912, the U.S. military invaded and occupied the country for the following 21 years, with only a short break in 1925–26 (Hudson 2017, 157–58). During the occupation, Wall Street firms only expanded their control of Nicaraguan banking (Hudson 2017, 156–75). After years of intense conflict between the forces of Nicaraguan rebel general Augusto C. Sandino and U.S. and Nicaraguan government forces, the U.S. wound down its occupation in 1933 and directed the formation of a new National Guard to protect an order favorable to U.S. interests in the country (Gobat 2005, 270–73). Within four years, the head of the National Guard, Anastasio Somoza García, took control of the Nicaraguan government, and he and his family would operate a military dictatorship from then until the Sandinista revolution in 1979.

During the U.S.-backed Somoza dictatorship, Nicaraguan economic activities faced several critical transitions. First, the Great Depression caused coffee prices to crash, leading Nicaraguan producers to export greater quantities and the Nicaraguan government to prioritize the development of U.S.- and Canadian-operated gold mines (Parsons 1955; Wheelock Román 1979, 125). World War II further intensified the Nicaraguan linkage with the U.S.; exports to the U.S. increased from 67 percent of all exports in 1938 to 91 percent of all exports in 1944

(Wheelock Román 1979, 125). After World War II, the U.S. government's newly established development program provided agricultural assistance to Nicaragua through the Nicaraguan Technical Agriculture Service and facilitated Nicaragua's absorption of U.S. postwar fertilizer and especially insecticide production through explosive growth in Nicaragua's cotton sector (Francis 2019; Wheelock Román 1979, 126–27). Meanwhile, the cattle ranching sector received U.S. technical assistance and loans from international financial institutions, generating a 250 percent increase in cattle slaughtered for domestic and export markets between 1960 and 1979 (Artola 1998; Bermúdez et al. 2015). These processes resulted in extensive portions of national territory being dedicated to cattle ranching and cotton and coffee farming. Powerful landholders displaced smallholders as they accumulated larger and larger expanses, recruiting displaced peasant men for seasonal wage labor (Wheelock Román 1979). Yet as Jonah Walters (2021, chap. 2) notes, there was still a great deal of agricultural diversity in the countryside amid this process. The primary results of this model were to generate massive profits for the largest government-aligned landholders, to keep Nicaraguan agricultural imports to the U.S. cheap, to maintain markets for U.S. chemicals, and to generate a growing sovereign debt for Nicaragua.

In 1979, the FSLN finally toppled the Somoza regime, which, armed and trained by the U.S., fought desperately to hold onto power in a conflict that claimed tens of thousands of lives. The FSLN government inherited a sovereign debt of $1.6 billion (Oxfam International 1998, 3)—and this was *prior* to the Global South debt crisis of the 1980s. The FSLN pursued agrarian reform, collectivization, and nationalizations to attempt to break out of the agro-export model, but the Volcker shock of 1980 and resulting collapse in commodity prices slashed revenues from agricultural and restricted the credit that the government badly needed to promote new economic sectors (Walters 2021, chap. 2). Rising oil prices, astronomical interest rates, U.S. support of the

Contras against the FSLN government, and, in 1985, a total U.S. embargo on Nicaragua exacerbated the country's economic crises and growth in the sovereign debt. The FSLN continued servicing and repaying debts to commercial banks in the early 1980s, but it halted payments after the U.S. imposed its embargo, instead opting to take out new loans from the Soviet Union (Dumazert 1995). When the FSLN government of Daniel Ortega lost the 1990 election to the opposition under Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, the debt had risen to $10.7 billion and would soon make Nicaragua the single most indebted country per capita in the world (Oxfam International 1998, 3).

Between 1990 and 2007, Nicaragua's economic history was characterized by a series of debt forgiveness and commercial debt buyback programs complemented by neoliberal austerity. Once the FSLN was ousted in the 1990 election, the Contra war came to an end, and the U.S. government called off the embargo, which allowed for the resumption of financial assistance and other aid. This facilitated financing from the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank to buy back $2 billion in commercial debt in 1995. A subsequent buyback in 2007 took place with a World Bank grant under the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries program. In exchange, the Nicaraguan governments of Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, Arnoldo Alemán, and Enrique Bolaños implemented structural adjustment programs demanded by the World Bank, IMF, and U.S. government, which included massive privatizations of state enterprises and public utilities and cuts to public sector spending (Catalán Aravena 2000). While most Nicaraguans previously suffered under hyperinflation, lack of credit, and war, they now faced the mass loss of formal employment, extraordinary utility costs, and the elimination of the social safety net, including free public health care.

These measures have taken on new forms under the second FSLN government of Daniel Ortega, which returned to power in 2007. On the one hand, the Ortega government expanded social spending, including anti-poverty programs and the resumption of free health care provision. On the other, it expanded manufacturing in the hyperexploitative free trade zones, cut taxes, maintained strict budget discipline, and serviced its sovereign debts. This balancing act was made possible by massive Venezuelan aid up until 2014. Since that aid dried up, the Ortega government has generally complied with IMF austerity recommendations, including cutting social spending and increasing taxes. Most notably, this included a major cut to the National Social Security Institute that exceeded IMF recommendations and resulted in mass protests against the government when it was proposed in April 2018. The government's extraordinarily violent response to those protests contributed to a drop in foreign investment and tourism in Nicaragua and a massive increase in emigration (especially to Costa Rica and the U.S.). Paired with the economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, Hurricanes Eta and Iota in 2020, and increased wheat and oil prices, Nicaragua became still more dependent on IFI assistance to avoid a disastrous debt or currency crisis while maintaining a reduced level of spending on social programs. For example, in 2022, this included a below-market, US$200 million from CABEI and a World Bank pandemic loan of US$116 million (International Monetary Fund 2023, 7). Even so, Nicaragua's public debt rose from 44.4 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) in 2017 to 58.1 percent in 2022 (International Monetary Fund 2023, 27). To service and pay debts and purchase imports, the Nicaraguan banking system needs U.S. dollars,[3] which it acquires through a combination of exports, remittances, and, of course, IFI grants and loans. The IMF makes regular recommendations on how Nicaragua can maintain sufficient U.S. dollar reserves and the sustainability of its debts, and other IFIs orient much of their lending toward export-

oriented industries that promise to bring in U.S. dollars. In short, the Nicaraguan government depends on IFIs—especially the IMF, World Bank, IDB, and CABEI—to pay its debts and purchase imports, which explains Nicaraguan authorities' close cooperation with IMF guidance as described consistently in the IMF's reports on Nicaragua. Were Nicaragua to reduce this cooperation, it would likely face debt and currency crises that would lead to a financial collapse and an increased likelihood of U.S. diplomatic, economic, or even military intervention aimed at replacing the current government or coercing it to pay its debts.

Nicaragua then faces an imperative to generate ever more U.S. dollars and ever higher revenues to purchase imports and service and pay debts. This imperative emerges from a structure of U.S. imperialism. When the Nicaraguan government develops plans to generate these dollars and revenues, it does so amid the existing structure of settler colonialism in the country described in the previous chapter. The structure that emerges from the conjuncture of U.S. imperialism and Nicaraguan settler colonialism is what I refer to as fractally recursive colonialism.[4] As mentioned in the introduction, fractal recursivity is "the projection of an opposition, salient at some level of relationship, onto some other level" (Irvine and Gal 2000, 38). The U.S. has used debt as a coercive mechanism to extract ever greater value from Nicaragua in terms of interest payments and profits to U.S. companies operating in, or exporting to, Nicaragua. As the Nicaraguan state seeks to generate revenues and dollars, its strategies have been structured by settler colonialism. The country's largest exports by value to the U.S. and to the world in 2021—beef and gold (The Observatory of Economic Complexity n.d.)[5]—are also the two largest drivers of the colonization of Indigenous and Afrodescendant territories (Mittal 2020). This operates both directly and indirectly. The settler state directly extracts value from Indigenous and Afrodescendant territories by collecting revenues on gold illicitly extracted from

those territories and cattle illicitly raised in those territories. Nicaraguan authorities have systematically refused to act against ranchers and miners conducting these activities.[6] The settler state also indirectly extracts value from these territories when it continues the longstanding practice of treating them as a safety valve for smallholders displaced from other regions of Nicaragua (see Chapter 1). In my conversations with settlers in the Rama-Kriol Territory, most claim to have sought land for subsistence after having been displaced by cattle ranchers or having lost jobs elsewhere in the country. As cattle ranching in western Nicaragua depletes aquifers (C. de Castro 2016) and gold mining companies acquire ever larger amounts of land for exploration and exploitation (Mittal, Mayer, and O'Neill 2020), smallholders are seeking out a new subsistence on the Caribbean coast. That is, the settler colonization of Indigenous and Afrodescendant territories by smallholder mestizos subsidizes agricultural and mining activities elsewhere in the country from which those smallholders have been displaced. Throughout this process, the relationship of domination between the U.S. and Nicaragua, mediated through debt, reproduces itself in the relationship of colonial violence and exploitation between settlers and Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples.

International Institutions and Territorial Conjurings

At the time that states were legislating on Indigenous and Afrodescendant communal lands and issuing communal titles, anthropologists and geographers identified the conformity of these policies with neoliberal dictates from IFIs (Bryan 2012; Hale 2005; 2011; Offen 2003). During the era of neoliberal multiculturalism, IFIs and states discovered that communal land titling fit with the formalization and standardization of property rights, the withdrawal of the welfare state, and compatibility with the broader model of market-led development. At the same

time, international institutions and states limited the possibilities of this transformation by recognizing land rights on the basis of cultural difference—as opposed to reparations or Indigenous sovereignty—and by cementing the state as the highest authority and arbiter (Hale 2005; Warren and Jackson 2002). These were disciplinary and subject-forming processes in the Foucauldian sense; recipients of land rights were to be formed into entrepreneurial citizens seeking investment in their lands without exceeding the self-restraint and respect for authority of the "indio permitido."[7]

As neoliberal multiculturalism has receded in much of Latin America over the past decade (Hale and Mullings 2020), the role of international institutions has been less studied in this new period.[8] I would suggest that this lack of research is due in part to a tendency to see such current white supremacist retrenchment as inward-looking and as a reaction to the externally imposed reengineering of society during the neoliberal multiculturalism era.[9] International institutions remain heavily involved in the political economy of Latin America and its newly titled Indigenous and Afrodescendant territories. The World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), and Central American Bank of Economic Integration (CABEI), among other financial institutions, certainly continue financing state projects, and capital flows are shaped by communal property titles, international norms on consultation and consent, and the reports and decisions issued by international human rights and judicial bodies.

This section examines the role of three types of international institutions: international judicial and human rights bodies, international NGOs, and financial institutions, including IFIs and development banks. Each subsection begins with a brief review of the relevant historical context of the institutions under discussion, continues with ethnographic material from my

participant observation, and concludes with an analysis of the present role of this set of institutions in relation to the conjuring of the Rama-Kriol Territory. These institutions have all contributed materially to collective acts of conjuring Indigenous and Afrodescendant territories, but, in recent years, the financial institutions have diverged from judicial bodies and NGOs as they shift from financing the formalization of land tenure back to financing more traditional forms of dispossession. While judicial bodies and NGOs have often denounced the results of this shift, they have been left almost totally debilitated in the absence of IFI support as a carrot for compliance with their recommendations and decisions. This situation has generated an opening for more radical resistance to settler, racial capitalist dispossession and violence.

International Judicial Bodies and Human Rights Organizations

Indigenous demands for recognition before international bodies dates back at least to Deskaheh's mission to the League of Nations in 1923 (Estes 2019, chap. 6). Over the past four decades, they have won various forms of recognition before the International Labour Organization (Convention 169), the United Nations (the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples), and the Organization of American States (especially in the Inter-American Human Rights System), among other entities. In the context of the Rama-Kriol Territory, the Inter-American Human Rights System stands out as particularly relevant to the process of conjuring territory and will be the primary subject of this subsection.

The Inter-American Human Rights System has played an essential role in the legal establishment of Indigenous and Black peoples' territorial rights in the Americas—and perhaps

nowhere more so than in Nicaragua. Formally established through the 1969 American Convention on Human Rights (which came into effect in 1978), the Inter-American Human Rights System is an entity of the Organization of American States (OAS) and consists of two bodies: the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) and Inter-American Court of Human Rights (Inter-American Court). The IACHR is responsible for holding hearings on human rights issues in member states of the OAS and for hearing petitions by persons from those states alleging violations of American Convention on Human Rights, among other responsibilities. In cases where the member state 1) is a party to the convention, 2) is found responsible for the violation by the IACHR, and 3) fails to comply with IACHR recommendations to remedy the violation, the IACHR may then bring the case to the Inter-American Court for binding adjudication. Crucially, members of both bodies are proposed by OAS member states and elected by the OAS General Assembly. Funding for the Inter-American Human Rights System is also provided by member states.

Despite the lengthy process for bringing a case from local authorities to the IACHR to the Inter-American Court, one such case emerged from Nicaragua's Caribbean coast in the late 1990s. Nicaragua's central government had issued a logging concession in the traditional lands of the Indigenous Mayangna community of Awas Tingni. The community, represented by a multinational legal team, petitioned the IACHR and brought the case to the Inter-American Court on the basis that the state had violated their right to "use and enjoyment" of their property, which was protected under Article 21 of the American Convention on Human Rights. As recounted by Hale (2005), the suit was novel for its claim that the right to property included communal property, and the community's lawyers successfully argued that a "modern" approach to Indigenous rights would recognize Indigenous peoples' relations with their traditional lands as

constituting communal property. This approach fit with the emergent recognition of Indigenous communal land rights at United Nations bodies after decades of Indigenous activism in international institutions (e.g., Pineda 2017). The community won the case in 2001, and the court ordered the state to delimit, demarcate, and title the community's property. This decision set a precedent for all state parties to the American Convention on Human Rights. While it reflected an ongoing "territorial turn" in Indigenous and Afrodescendant rights (Offen 2003), *Awas Tingni v. Nicaragua* was noteworthy for providing a clear legal requirement for states to establish demarcation and titling procedures for Indigenous communal lands in domestic law. The Inter-American Court specifically recognized *Indigenous* property rights in *Awas Tingni*, but subsequent decisions and practices have treated Afrodescendant peoples as subjects of these same rights *as cultural rights* (Dulitzky 2010; Hooker 2005). Because the *Awas Tingni* decision was rooted in the cultural differences between Indigenous peoples and the national majority, rather than any recognition of Indigenous sovereignty that pre-dated the settler state, Afrodescendant communities on Nicaragua's Caribbean coast and in much of Latin America were equally subject to the decision's principle for multicultural recognition. In Nicaragua, *Awas Tingni* led to a two-year process of negotiations that ultimately resulted in territorial demarcation and titling legislation (Law 445) and the titling of 23 Indigenous and Afrodescendant territories—representing 31 percent of Nicaragua territory—between 2005 and 2016.

Since *Awas Tingni v. Nicaragua*, the Inter-American Human Rights System has continued weighing in on the nature of these newly recognized territories. The Inter-American Court's decisions in *Saramaka v. Suriname* (2007) and *Sarayaku v. Ecuador* (2012) determined that states have a duty to consult with Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples prior to carrying out projects that could impact their territory. *Punta Piedra v. Honduras* (2015) saw the Inter-

American Court order the state to guarantee Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples the use and enjoyment of their territories by taking effective measures to relocate third parties outside of the community's lands, provide payment to third parties for any improvements on communal lands, and prevent further incursions into territories by third parties. In short, the Inter-American Court has established that states have a strict obligation to ensure that Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples can use and enjoy their territories and to consult with them prior to taking actions that might affect them, though the obligation to obtain consent has not yet been addressed by the court.

If the Inter-American System played an essential role in the shifting legal practices of territory through these emblematic cases that arose during the era of neoliberal multiculturalism, how has it followed up on them in the present period? A case that arose in the Rama-Kriol Territory—that of the Grand Interoceanic Canal of Nicaragua, as described in the introduction—is illustrative:

Case 13.615 was up first when the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) opened its 175th Period of Sessions on March 5, 2020, in the wealthy central area of Pétion-Ville, a suburb of Port-au-Prince, Haiti. The case, filed by leaders of the Rama-Kriol Territory and three other Indigenous and Afrodescendant communities, centers on the proposed Grand Interoceanic Canal of Nicaragua, which could affect their communal lands if built. The petitioners, represented by Nicaraguan attorney and Indigenous rights activist María Luisa Acosta, accused the Nicaraguan state of violating its duty to conduct a free, prior, and informed consultation process with the Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples affected by the project, as established under domestic law, international law, and Inter-American Court of Human Rights jurisprudence (see Chapter 4).[10] After Nicaragua's Supreme Court of Justice summarily

dismissed all lawsuits against the canal project in December 2013, the representatives of the four communities filed a petition with the IACHR in June 2014.

Nearly six years later, the IACHR had moved the case to the merits stage, at which point it would hear and evaluate arguments from the petitioner and the state on the substance of the dispute. In addition to filing written arguments and evidence, the petitioners requested an in-person hearing and submitted my name as an expert witness. I had been conducting ethnographic, activist research alongside the Rama-Kriol Territorial Government (GTR-K) immediately after the petition was first filed and at the time that the Nicaraguan government claimed to carry out a consultation process.[11] In addition to my testimony, the hearing would include arguments from representatives of the petitioners and the state and then questions from members of the IACHR.

The path to this point required a great deal of investment from the petitioners. Acosta had continuously gathered evidence since first filing the petition in 2014. She submitted numerous filings to the IACHR to bring the case to the merits stage and participated in multiple thematic IACHR hearings alongside community leaders to push the IACHR to speed up the process. Meanwhile, community leaders faced immense pressure to drop or undermine the case. A prominent Rama community leader had been fired from their position as a civil servant. A former GTR-K leader was told they would not receive state approval for business ventures in the Rama-Kriol Territory unless they withdrew the petition to the IACHR.

Most notably, in the two weeks before the hearing, a senior Nicaraguan government official in the region was seeking community leaders' signatures on a letter renouncing the case. As I conducted participant observation in the GTR-K office one afternoon, a group of GTR-K members arrived and gave accounts of the aftermath of a meeting with representatives from the

United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). To start, one GTR-K member, a vocal opponent of the ruling party, had been barred entry to the meeting. After the FAO representatives left, the GTR-K members stayed to receive the second half of their stipends for the work they had missed during the meeting. The government official proceeded to request that each GTR-K member sign onto the letter. The letter was never read aloud. One GTR-K member told the group assembled in the GTR-K office, "Yeah, I did sign it, but I no understand what it say."[12] Another told us he refused to sign it and was denied the second half of his stipend. "You no getting it," he recalled the government official telling him, "and you no win (earn) it." As described further in Chapter 4, the state imposed significant material costs on those who maintained their opposition to the canal.

Despite these difficulties, I traveled to Port-au-Prince on March 3 alongside Dr. Acosta and the two community leaders who would testify: Rama lawyer Becky McCray and Kriol community leader Dolene Miller. Funds for the flights, hotel, and lost work involved in the trip were cobbled together from several grants and supplemented by personal funds.[13] At 8:30 a.m. on March 5, Joel Hernández, the president of the IACHR, called the hearing to order. He noted the significance of the presence of representatives of the Nicaraguan state, which had chosen not to send representatives to IACHR thematic hearings in recent years. The representatives included a lawyer from the Nicaraguan attorney general's office, two Kriol Sandinista party officials, and, notably, the then-president of the GTR-K, who was disobeying a decision of the GTR-K that he should not attend the hearing.

In the hearing, the petitioners argued that the state had failed to conduct a consultation process until receiving free, prior, and informed consent and that the state's efforts to shut down opposition to the canal project had generated further violations of the communities' right to self-

determination. The state first sought to discredit the individuals who filed the petition on behalf of their communities, then insisted that the IACHR should not intervene in the internal affairs of the GTR-K, and finally argued that the Nicaraguan state has respected Indigenous rights based on the titles it has issued and the development plan it has approved for the Caribbean coast region. After several questions from the commissioners, the hearing ended. The next day, members of the Haitian diplomatic corps shuttled the representatives of the petitioners and me back to the airport for our return to Nicaragua—or, in Acosta's case, to her home in exile.[14]

Throughout this hearing, it was hardly mentioned that the canal project itself was all but dead. The billionaire Chinese businessman whose company had received the concession for the project had lost some 85 percent of his wealth in the stock market (Phillips 2015), and there was no sign of further capital for the project. Nicaraguan president Daniel Ortega insisted in 2019 that the canal project was continuing, but this has not materialized (AFP 2019). Despite all of this, the Inter-American System has continued moving forward with the case as lethargically as ever. In February 2023, the Inter-American Court finally held a hearing on the case in San José, Costa Rica, which again focused on the consultation process, state coercion, and the government's creation of FSLN-affiliated parallel governments as a method to perform compliance with laws on community self-determination. In contrast with the IACHR hearing in Haiti, no representatives of the Nicaraguan state attended the Inter-American Court hearing, reflecting the current government's 2021 decision to withdraw from the OAS.[15] The Inter-American Court is expected to announce a decision later in 2023.

The hearing in Haiti displayed several key elements of the Inter-American Human Rights System's role in conjuring territory. In the first place, it was meaningful that representatives of the Nicaraguan state attended that hearing. Their presence at this hearing on the merits stage of

the case—in contrast to their absence from contemporary thematic hearings not addressing specific petitions (e.g., *El Nuevo Diario* 2018) and from a recent Inter-American Court hearing on political prisoners (Vega Sánchez 2021)—indicates that the government was interested in maintaining the perception that it respects Indigenous and Afrodescendant rights. This fits with what I have found previously in my research: that Nicaraguan government officials have invested considerable energies to defending the government's record on Indigenous and Afrodescendant rights in venues like the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues and—prior to announcing Nicaragua's withdrawal from the OAS—the Inter-American Human Rights System. This tendency may reflect the state's need to perform respect for Indigenous and Afrodescendant rights in order to obtain foreign direct investment with social responsibility conditions. In short, the state could have simply ignored hearings like the one in Haiti without consequences, as they have in other cases and did in the Inter-American Court hearing on this case. The decision of the IACHR to proceed with the petition led the state to invest materially in performing compliance by attending the hearing and attempting to secure support from Rama and Kriol leaders through the alleged instances of bribery, extortion, and other forms of coercion described above. These practices solidify the materiality of the Rama-Kriol Territory; territorial recognition shapes flows of money and power, even if in ways that are only loosely related to the lives of most Rama and Kriol people.

At the same time, the lengthy process through which the case has proceeded and the lack of effective enforcement mechanisms for Inter-American Court decisions demonstrates the limitations of the entire Inter-American Human Rights System as a mechanism for conjuring Indigenous and Afrodescendant territories. The Inter-American Human Rights System, like the other international human rights bodies mentioned earlier in this section, is an entity that is

funded and appointed by states; in the case of the IACHR and Inter-American Court specifically, these are settler and arrivant states. The IACHR and Inter-American Court have faced attacks from both left- and right-wing governments for political bias, and these attacks have diminished the willingness of the commissioners and judges to pursue politically difficult cases (Cassel 2014)—especially in cases involving Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples' rights when states seek to use their territories.[16] The long delay in hearing the canal case—to the point that the project itself appears to have been dead in the water for years before the hearing—results from some combination of the IACHR's hesitancy to take highly controversial cases of that sort and the underfunding of the entire Inter-American Human Rights System by OAS member states. Even if the case does ultimately result in an order from the Inter-American Court to retract the canal project concession, there Inter-American Human Rights System has no effective enforcement mechanism if the Nicaraguan state refuses to comply. Enforcement would likely hinge on other states and private actors creating a high enough cost for failing to comply.

In sum, international judicial and human rights bodies take actions related to Indigenous and Afrodescendant territories that give the territories added material significance; however, these institutions are founded, financed, and overseen by settler states, which diminishes their willingness to address controversial cases on Indigenous and Afrodescendant territories. This is true even though the Inter-American Court's decisions in such cases contain no enforcement mechanism. As the financial and ideological project of neoliberal multiculturalism continues to fade in the Americas (Hale and Mullings 2020), international judicial and human rights bodies like the Inter-American Human Rights System will likely be further constrained in their ability to address settler land grabs and violence in Indigenous and Afrodescendant territories.

International NGOs

In my first few months conducting participant observation in the GTR-K headquarters, certain names kept arising of outside figures who needed to be consulted regarding funding, procedures, and certain key decisions. Over the roughly two decades since the Rama-Kriol Territory and its representative institutions began seeking state recognition, a half dozen or so NGO workers had become embedded in the politics of the territory. Many of them came from conservationist NGOs organizations working to protect forests and large mammals in the Caribbean coast region. European development agencies also had a presence in the territory; one had an office within the GTR-K headquarters until 2017. María Luisa Acosta, the Indigenous rights lawyer working on the canal petition before the IACHR, had also worked with the Rama-Kriol communities since the 1990s through the NGO she founded. This set of individuals became part of GTR-K governance, even as most of them have had to leave Nicaragua due to pressure or threats from the government.

NGOs collaborated with the Rama and Kriol communities on projects that were essential in the early years of the GTR-K. These include the development of the report (diagnóstico) justifying the request for territorial titling, the formulation of territorial statutes, the creation and early implementation of a land management plan, the preparation and filing of domestic and international legal actions over land grabs, and the operation of a community forest ranger program in the southeastern part of the territory (see Chapter 5), among others. NGO funding has allowed for activities that would otherwise be impossible; for example, the cost of timely transportation through the territory—which, for most communities, requires seaworthy pangas, outboard motors, and gasoline—is commonly a major expenditure that NGOs fund. This has provided spaces for the Rama and Kriol communities to build their authority in the territory.

Many of the operations of the GTR-K itself—including holding meetings between members of the nine communities and conducting advocacy activities—would not be possible with the revenues received from the Nicaraguan central government alone.[17]

At the same time, well-rehearsed critiques of NGOs and the philanthropy industrial complex certainly hold true: that these NGOs are undemocratic, depoliticizing, and often domineering entities that address superficial issues instead of underlying structures (Incite! Women of Color Against Violence 2017; Speed 2005; Sundberg 1998). NGOs are governed by unaccountable boards and funded and influenced by private donors. Revolution is not on their agenda (Incite! Women of Color Against Violence 2017), nor is Indigenous and Afrodescendant sovereignty in titled territories if that would detract from the material interests of NGO donors (and it most certainly would). In the Rama-Kriol Territory, NGOs have introduced the discourse of "resources" (natural, human, and otherwise) and helped make it dominant. NGO workers' sense of what is reasonable, practical, and appropriate sometimes constrains political possibilities or even sets political strategies within the territory. Though some NGO workers I know in the territory have expressed their support for decolonization and Indigenous and Afrodescendant sovereignty, their organizations are incapable of supporting those radical ends. This does not necessarily detract from the authority-building work that NGO funding has enabled within the territory, but it does raise serious questions about the political costs of NGO involvement, especially considering the radical political alternatives that have coexisted with the dominant, NGO-supported model of territorial administration (Baracco 2016; Gaitán-Barrera and Azeez 2015; Hale 2011). NGOs have undoubtedly participated in the process of making territories materially real by funding their administration and supporting some political projects pursued by Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples to claim authority in their territories. However, they

have likely foreclosed other possibilities for more radical assertions of Indigenous and Afrodescendant territorial authority.

In the present period, only a handful of NGOs continue working in the territory due to the increasingly difficult legal and political environment for NGOs in Nicaragua. GTR-K leaders have faced pressure from government officials to allow agreements with NGOs to expire, and one of the international NGOs that has worked in the territory—Oxfam IBIS—has been stripped of its legal status by the Nicaraguan government (López 2021). Several other Nicaraguan NGOs that received international funding have also been shuttered by the government. Those NGOs that do remain have to carefully manage their relationships with government officials or operate entirely under the radar. Amid these difficulties, NGO funding for territorial administration has dropped off almost entirely, but funding for conservation activities, including the forest ranger program, has continued. This reflects a situation in which many NGOs have continued to pursue the neoliberal multiculturalism model far beyond the state's interest in that model. As the Nicaraguan state has withdrawn from the model of neoliberal multiculturalism, NGOs have come into conflict with the state by earnestly seeking to continue the process of territorial recognition.

International Financial Institutions and Development Banks

IFIs and development banks took a prominent role in the formalization of Indigenous and Afrodescendant land rights during the era of neoliberal multiculturalism, but their role in the conjuring of territory in the present period has been less direct. In the Rama-Kriol Territory, IFIs joined with NGOs to support the technical work that was necessary to apply for titling between 2003 and 2009, but, since then, their financing has not generally focused on consolidating Rama

and Kriol authority in their territory. Instead, I argue in this subsection that IFIs have affected the conjuring of territory in two primary ways over the past decade. First, individual IFIs have partially acceded to Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples' demands that financing for projects affecting their territories be cancelled. Second, they have provided financing and technical recommendations to activities that have contributed to the settler colonization of Indigenous and Afrodescendant territories.

The first matter has come to prominence in recent disputes over funding for Nicaragua's Reduction of Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) program.[18] The program was first proposed in 2008 through the World Bank's Forest Carbon Partnership Facility (FCPF). The FCPF financing mechanism pledges funds from 17 donor countries and organizations if certain actions are carried out and goals are met by the end of the program. Using that pledge as collateral, the World Bank assists with obtaining the loans needed to finance the initiatives that are supposed to meet those goals. Nicaragua received US$5 million through the FCPF for its "readiness" program and reached the final stage of negotiating a payment agreement of US$55 million for the conservation of 2.4 million hectares of forest (López B. 2019). This prospect met intense resistance from the Alliance of Indigenous and Afrodescendant Peoples of Nicaragua and environmental organizations, which launched a media campaign and pushed the FCPF to cancel the program on the basis that it conserved too little forest, provided the bulk of its financing to cattle ranchers who had already carried out deforestation in Indigenous and Afrodescendant lands, and did not meet international standards for free, prior, and informed consultation of, and consent from, the affected Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples (Lang 2020; López B. 2019). By early 2021, the pressure seemed to work; the FCPF

announced the cancellation of the program due to "challenges" related to "full benefit sharing with indigenous communities" and "on the ground monitoring and evaluation" (Lang 2021).

Meanwhile, CABEI proposed a related project to the Green Climate Fund (GCF), which was created under the 2015 Paris Agreement to, like the FCPF, assemble favorable climate financing packages from donor countries and organizations. The GCF approved US$57.9 million in loans and $58.7 million grants for Nicaragua in November 2020; roughly half would come from the GCF, two-fifths from CABEI, and 10 percent from the Global Environment Facility. This time, a complaint was filed anonymously with the GCF's Independent Redress Mechanism, which is charged with investigating complaints of potential and real policy violations and harms generated by GCF actions. In March 2022, the Independent Redress Mechanism issued a compliance appraisal report finding prima facie evidence that the project could increase "risks of violence due to the non-compliance of the project with GCF operational policies and procedures;" that the project violated the norms of prior consultation and free, prior, and informed consent of Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples, in part due to the potential for government-imposed communal governments; and that the project could "lead to an increase in violence and further encroachments of indigenous lands by illegal settlers" due to the state's failure to remove settlers from Indigenous and Afrodescendant territories (Independent Redress Mechanism 2022). These findings led to a full compliance investigation, and the Independent Redress Mechanism submitted its confidential report to the GCF board for its October 2022 meeting. The board discussed the report and responses from the GCF secretariat and legal advisors in closed sessions at its October 2022 and March 2023 meetings, but it has not announced any further decisions in the case. Based on my conversations with Indigenous and Afrodescendant activists involved in the complaint, the lack of a final decision could reflect an

effort by board member to maintain leverage over the Nicaraguan state. This would align with the recommendations of the United Nations Human Rights Council's Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua, which recommended that international entities impose conditions on financing to Nicaragua linked to the human rights situation in the country (Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua 2023, 18).

The decisions from the FCPF and GCF are, in one sense, merely a reflection of an international, recognition-based multiculturalism toward Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples, the harms of which have been described in the preceding chapter. Still, they seem to reflect something more than an analysis of the profits of the project as opposed to the potential profits if communal tenure is stabilized in Indigenous and Afrodescendant territories. One possible explanation is that IFIs now face greater legal exposure when they violate their own policies after the U.S. Supreme Court's 2019 *Jam et al. v. International Finance Corp.* decision, which rejected the principle of absolute sovereign immunity for international organizations when they engage in commercial activities. In *Jam*, the World Bank had declined to act on the recommendations of its internal ombuds office, equivalent to the GCF's Independent Redress Mechanism. The GCF is headquartered in South Korea and CABEI in Honduras, but the Global Environment Facility—responsible for a tenth of the project's financing—is headquartered in the U.S., potentially opening it to litigation in U.S. courts if its financing results in foreseeable harms to Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples in Nicaragua. The FCPF and GCF decisions on climate financing in Nicaragua raise a precarious prospect that Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples might be able to play the settler state and IFIs off each other to build their authority in their territories. Though neoliberal multiculturalism has receded as a state policy in the Americas, multiculturalist safeguards at IFIs might give Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples

leverage to force settler states into certain actions. For example, if the Nicaraguan government wants to obtain GCF financing, the GCF—responding to Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples' complaints—may require Nicaraguan authorities to remove settlers from communal lands to reduce the risk of contributing to violence and rights violations that could open it to both litigation and reputational damage.

Even as IFIs have at times suspended or canceled financing that risks directly financing the colonization of Indigenous and Afrodescendant territories, they have continued to finance export-oriented projects that indirectly contribute to the colonization of Indigenous and Afrodescendant territories. As I noted out earlier in this chapter and dissertation, IFIs spent the second half of the 20th century financing agricultural colonization programs and cattle ranching in Indigenous and Afrodescendant territories. More recent IFI actions include recommending that the Nicaraguan government boost growth and foreign exchange reserves by advancing the cattle ranching and gold mining sectors. For example, the IMF regularly evaluates the business environment in Nicaragua and has recently recommended "facilitating small producers' cooperatives and supporting the agency for agricultural technology research to spur productivity in the countryside" (International Monetary Fund 2023, 60). Meanwhile, the World Bank financed the construction of a highway between the Somoza-era agricultural colonies near Nueva Guinea and Bluefields—crossing through the Rama-Kriol Territory—for the sake of "improv[ing] the access of the rural population living in the project areas to markets" (World Bank 2020, 43). Both the cattle ranching and gold mining sectors depend on the use of Indigenous and Afrodescendant territories in violation of their titles, where lands are cleared for pasture and new industrial gold exploration and small-scale gold mining are taking place. Beyond the direct use of Indigenous and Afrodescendant territories, these two sectors have also

purchased or taken lands from smallholders near the territories who in have then proceeded to colonize Indigenous and Afrodescendant lands.

IFIs and development banks continue financing projects that directly or indirectly advance Indigenous and Afrodescendant dispossession and environmental destruction. Their loans do not necessarily ignore the existence of Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples, as was typically the case before the neoliberal multiculturalism era. Instead, they give these peoples and their territories a brief mention and often note that the affected Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples have been consulted. As was the case with the canal project and the REDD+ program, these consultations are often carried out with only government-aligned communal authorities, with monetary compensation made contingent on granting consent, and with little information presented to those "consulted" (see Chapter 4). IFIs and development banks evidently understand Indigenous and Afrodescendant territories to be real enough to require mention, but their practices empty territorial titles of their substance by advancing the settler colonization of the lands they contain.

Conclusion

The sections of this chapter have highlighted the contradictions of the role of the U.S. and international institutions in the present, transitional political moment for Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples in Latin America. International judicial and human rights organizations continue their denunciations of state violence and the colonization of Indigenous and Afrodescendant territories to no avail. The role of NGOs in the present moment is significantly reduced from their role during the neoliberal multiculturalism era, but some do continue to operate in Indigenous and Afrodescendant territories. IFIs have shifted from defining and

restricting communal land tenure to financing the advance of settler colonial frontiers into those territories. Even so, Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples' complaints to IFIs over their approved climate financing has created opportunities for leverage against the settler state. As the material and institutional arrangements of the neoliberal multicultural period recede, IFIs have retained their critical role in Nicaraguan political economy through U.S.-enforced indebtedness.

As Shannon Speed (2020) has argued, the seemingly sharp disjuncture between the period of neoliberal multiculturalism and the ensuing white supremacist, authoritarian retrenchment in the Americas reflects a shift in settler tactics, not a backlash to multiculturalist policies. Indigenous and Afrodescendant territorial titling brought both peoples and lands into the state's grids of intelligibility (Hale 2011), facilitating private investment and channeling resistance into the state's own highly constricted legal and political avenues. Around the time that titling was being completed in Nicaragua, multiculturalist policies had outlived their usefulness; settler violence would resume its primacy as the tool for expropriating titled Indigenous and Afrodescendant territories for use by the national majority, as recent events have shown (Oakland Institute 2023). Attending to the continuities between these periods, we can see that there is not some shift between multiculturalism and racism, but a shift in frontier logics. In the neoliberal multicultural period, the frontier of settlement existed in the form of limits on territorial recognition and the government's moves to control Indigenous and Afrodescendant governance institutions in order to claim to have received consent for extractive projects in their territories. As that frontier logic has run its course, an older frontier logic has returned to the fore as settlers—individuals and firms, often with tacit or explicit support from the state and IFIs—have used violence to expropriate lands from Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples.

Still, as this account has made clear, international institutions *do* act in ways that contribute to the materiality of the territories. In response to cases and complaints before international judicial and human rights organizations, the Nicaraguan state has had to invest in performances of respect of Indigenous and Afrodescendant territorial rights, but those performances far exceed the reality of government action. International NGOs continue funding projects in Indigenous and Afrodescendant territories that may contribute to the communities' ability to build authority, but they also constrain radical politics in the territories. IFIs and development banks, like the Nicaraguan state, give lip service to respect for Indigenous and Afrodescendant territorial rights, but their funding of projects that dispossess Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples continues largely unabated. Even so, the selective use of multiculturalist policies has likely saved lives and somewhat slowed Indigenous and Afrodescendant dispossession in the present period, even if those policies remain firmly embedded in the structure of settler colonialism (see also Hale 2020; Ybarra 2018). The multiculturalist recognition of territorial titles has made it somewhat more difficult for IFIs and development banks to invest in projects that directly dispossess Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples. It has also provided more opportunities for legal actions before international bodies, which may in turn raise costs for the Nicaraguan state to promote violent dispossession and may lead potential investors to fear negative publicity over involvement in enterprises that could contribute to violence and dispossession. These contributions are small relative to the scale of fractally recursive colonialism, but they may still be important in somewhat reducing the constant harms of that structure before it can be dismantled.

Indigenous and Afrodescendant territories will never be conjured into existence simply because of recommendations, orders, financing, or advice from international institutions.

However, these international institutions—responding to decades of international Indigenous and Afrodescendant resistance and demands—form part of the web of actors that collectively determine the meaning of Indigenous and Afrodescendant territories through their practices and imaginaries. This chapter has centered the role of international actors in relation to territories on Nicaragua's Caribbean coast in order to better understand their role in the broader conjuring of territory in Latin America. Though this is undoubtedly a dangerous period for these Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples, it also represents an opportunity to seek political horizons far beyond those offered by international institutions over recent decades. It remains to be seen whether these institutions' modest contributions to the conjuring of Indigenous and Afrodescendant territories will continue to have a role in this period of renewed resistance.

Notes

[1] While IFIs ultimately seized on the territorial turn to accomplish their own ends, this does not take away from the immense work of Indigenous and Afrodescendant social movements over many decades to obtain legal recognition and protection for collective territories. These and related efforts have been described by Kristen A. Carpenter and Angela R. Riley (2014), Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz (1984), Charles R. Hale (2005; 2020), Tianna Paschel (2016), Manuela Picq (2018), and Baron Pineda (2017), among others. As Hale (2020), Megan Ybarra (2018), and others have argued, multiculturalist laws can still provide lifesaving openings for use by Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples, even though their use also poses risks.

[2] Relatedly, Shannon Speed (2008b) has shown how Indigenous communities in Chiapas have selectively appropriated and expanded upon the international discourse of rights as they resist Mexican state authority.

[3] Thank you to Hannah Appel for conversations and writings (e.g., Appel 2020) orienting me toward the importance of U.S. dollars as the currency in which debts, imports, and exports are paid.

[4] On the "structure of the conjuncture," see the work of Marshall Sahlins (e.g., 1985).

[5] This excludes products from free trade zones.

[6] The state also collects revenues on exploratory mining concessions issued to foreign mining companies in these territories.

[7] "Indio permitido" is translated by Hale as "authorized Indian." "The phrase 'indio permitido' names a sociopolitical category, not the characteristics of anyone in particular. We [Hale and Rosamel Millamán] borrow the phrase from Bolivian sociologist Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, who uttered it spontaneously, in exasperation, during a workshop on cultural rights and democratization in Latin America. We need a way, Rivera noted, to talk about how governments are using cultural rights to divide and domesticate indigenous movements" (Hale 2004, 17).

[8] Hale and Mullings (2020) rightly take a hemispheric approach to racial projects instead of focusing only on Latin America. In this chapter, I focus specifically on Latin America as the region where territorial titling took place with IFI support during the neoliberal multiculturalism period and because it is consistently an object of U.S. imperialism. These elements—closely linked through fractally recursive colonialism—make racial projects in Latin America materially distinctive from those in the North America. Latin American racial projects are fueled by the economic imperialism of the U.S. and the Global North, while racial projects in North America are fueled by the profits of settler capitalism in Latin America and the Global South.

[9] Speed (2020) and Hale and Mullings (2020) push back against this idea of a "backlash" to multiculturalism, noting that white supremacy has remained fully intact throughout the multiculturalist period.

[10] The duty to consult is specifically established under Nicaraguan Law 445 (2003), International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention 169 (ratified by Nicaragua in 2011), and the decisions of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in *Saramaka v. Suriname* (2007) and *Sarayaku v. Ecuador* (2012).

[11] The Rama-Kriol Territory Government (GTR-K) is a confederated government of the nine communities in the Rama-Kriol Territory. Under the statutes of the GTR-K, the assembled members of each community (the "communal assembly") are the highest authority in that community. Each communal assembly elects a seven-member communal government to represent them and carry-out the day-to-day activities of governance, including administering funds and projects. The members of all nine communal governments—that is, 63 people in total—constitute the Territorial Assembly, which is to meet at least semi-annually and is the highest authority in the territory. Further, the communal assemblies elect two members of the communal government to serve as members of the GTR-K, and the Territorial Assembly elects nine of those GTR-K members to serve in specific officer roles. The GTR-K administers funds and projects in the whole territory, works with other levels of government and NGOs, and typically serves as the legal representative of the territory. The GTR-K has its seat in the city of Bluefields, just north of the territory.

[12] Quotations in the English-based creole languages spoken by Rama and Kriol people (Miskito Coast Creole and Rama Cay Creole) are transcribed in Standard American English orthography. When word meanings vary significantly between the original language and Standard American English, a translation of the relevant word is given in parentheses.

[13] The sources of these grants included both NGOs and academic institutions.

[14] Acosta has had to flee Nicaragua after participating in a national dialogue between the current government and the opposition amid the country's sociopolitical crisis in 2018. She participated in those talks as president of the Nicaraguan Academy of Sciences. Acosta's exile flies in the face of the Inter-American Court's decision in *Acosta Castellón et al. v. Nicaragua* (2017), which found that the Nicaraguan state violated Acosta's human rights by failing to investigate the 2002 torture and murder of her husband, Francisco "Frank" García Valle, in an attack seemingly aimed at Acosta herself due to her work to protect Kriol islands from privatization by a Greek American businessperson. In the decision, the court ordered the state to create protection mechanisms for human rights defenders. Acosta's exile was one particularly salient example of the state's refusal to comply with that order.

[15] Any member state may denounce the Charter of the OAS and withdraw, but that decision only becomes effective after two years. As a result, the Inter-American Human Rights System continues to have jurisdiction in cases where the actions in question took place prior to the end of those two years, and the state is legally bound to continue to comply with decisions on those and earlier cases even after withdrawing from the OAS. Because the Nicaraguan state has refused to recognize and comply with Inter-American Court decisions, the court has held it to be in permanent contempt of court ("Inter-American Human Rights Court Says Nicaragua in Contempt" 2022).

[16] Former IACHR president James Cavallaro has confirmed this in a public appearance at the UCLA Promise Institute on March 11, 2021. Particularly influential was the Brazilian state's reaction to an IACHR 2011 order to halt permitting of the Belo Monte dam until consultations with the affected Indigenous peoples could take place.

The government of then-president Dilma Rousseff "recalled its ambassador from the OAS, withdrew its candidate for the Inter-American Commission, and reportedly withheld its financial contribution to the OAS" (Cassel 2014, 22).

[17] Under Law 445, 25 percent of government revenues from within an Indigenous or Afrodescendant community must be distributed to that community by the Nicaraguan Ministry of Finance and Public Credit. In practice, the central government distributes these payments irregularly.

[18] REDD+ programs have been formulated in "developing" countries around the world after having been negotiated through the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. The idea is for "developed" countries to finance initiatives to preserve forest carbon sinks in "developing" countries. The programs have often been highly controversial, unaccountable, and unsuccessful to date in accomplishing their stated goals. For more on the range of REDD+ programs, see Stephanie Paladino and Shirley J. Fiske's edited volume *The Carbon Fix: Forest Carbon, Social Justice, and Environmental Governance* (2017).

Chapter 3: Narrating Rama-Kriol Political Thought:

Oral Histories of Indian River and Greytown

Joshua L. Mayer and four anonymous co-authors from Indian River and Greytown[1]

Introduction

The first two chapters of this dissertation focused on the structural conditions of settler capitalism and fractally recursive colonialism that the Rama and Kriol peoples endure in Nicaragua. This and the following two chapters turn to the political thought and action of Rama and Kriol peoples amid, and in opposition to, these structural conditions. Before moving to the results of activist participant-observation in chapters 4 and 5, this chapter provides descriptions of Rama-Kriol political thought in the form of an oral history of Rama community of Indian River and the Kriol community of Greytown. This prepares the reader to understand the sources of Rama-Kriol political action against a settler capitalist megaproject in Chapter 4 and gradual, racialized dispossession at the hands of mestizo settlers in Chapter 5.

An oral history of the communities of Indian River and Greytown very quickly turns into a history of southeastern Nicaragua—and even of Central America and the Caribbean. Personal and family histories resist the imagined homogeneity and geographical boundedness of Afro-Indigenous peoples in the legal instruments that recognize them for their "cultural difference" from the national majority—that is, mestizo-settler—population. This chapter demonstrates how histories of movement, far from delegitimizing the territorial claims of Rama and Kriol people, in fact serve as a source for political thought and action that is radically opposed to settler capitalist enclosure. These histories of mobility, as lived out by Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples elsewhere in the continent and the world (e.g., N. Roberts 2015; Whyte, Talley, and

Gibson 2019), provide a toolkit for survival and political action amid the intertwined violence of fractally-recursive settler capitalism and the climate crisis.

This chapter generally proceeds chronologically. The most important signpost for interviewees was the "war time," which began with the Sandinista revolution in 1979 and concluded with the electoral defeat of the FSLN in the 1990 elections. After a discussion of methods, the chapter begins with stories of old times—that is, times before the war. This section includes ancestral histories, arrivals in Indian River and Greytown, and pre-war life. The second section turns to narratives of the war, including the experiences of those who fought in it, those who endured it as civilians, and those who escaped it as refugees. The third section then turns to stories of postwar return or arrival. In the concluding section, we reflect on the forms of Rama-Kriol political thought that emerged through these interviews, particularly with respect to ideas of care for the territory and of freedom.

Methods

This chapter results from community-directed oral history research conducted in Indian River and Greytown in April, June, and July 2022. From Mayer's early planning meetings in the communities in 2019, it was overwhelmingly clear that community members wanted there to be a historical dimension to this dissertation project. As a result, Mayer held occasional community presentations on findings from archival and library research on the history of the region, much of which is included in the introduction and first chapter of this dissertation. During the conversations that ensued from these presentations, a key problem was the disconnect between distant histories written in distant books and the histories that Rama and Kriol people themselves knew in the communities. Some community leaders and college-educated young people were

aware of these historical sources on Rama and Kriol people, and a wide cross-section of community members clearly valued these histories in our conversations. Still, these histories were not widely known, nor were they central to the histories that community members themselves told about their communities. For *that* history, we decided to take advantage of Mayer's training in oral history methods to pursue an oral history of the two communities. This research was originally planned for March and April 2020, but due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was ultimately delayed until Mayer could safely return to Nicaragua in 2022.

To conduct this component of the research, each community selected two researchers who would be hired directly by the communities with Mayer's dissertation research funding.[2] After Mayer sketched out the research with community leaders, he developed a preliminary interview guide and held a workshop on oral history interviewing methods with the rest of the research team and several community leaders. The community-elected researchers modified the guide during that workshop and again during the interview process when questions turned out to be unclear and when new themes emerged. Community leaders decided to divide the research chronologically into two segments. Each segment would involve Mayer and the two researchers from one community interviewing people from that community. Interviews with the Indian River researchers were conducted exclusively in Creole. The researchers elected for Greytown are both L1 Spanish speakers; one is a monolingual Spanish speaker, and the other speaks Creole fluently but with some discomfort. This reflects language use in Greytown; only a handful of community members under the age of 35 speak Creole fluently. As a result, almost all Greytown interviews were conducted in Spanish. When interviewees felt uncomfortable speaking in Spanish, the co-author who is fluent in Creole interviewed them in Creole. Many interviews also slipped back and forth between languages. This presents certain drawbacks; some community members gave

interviews in Spanish despite feeling more comfortable expressing themselves in Creole. Crucially, though, the corpus of Spanish-language interviews will be far more accessible to the generation of young Kriol Spanish-speakers in Greytown than it would have been in Creole.

Mayer's initial proposal was to interview a dozen or so long-time community members from each community who, in his view, were most likely to be able to provide a diachronic account of community life from the Somoza dictatorship or earlier through to the present day. The community-elected researchers pushed back on this approach and consistently reminded Mayer that young people have histories, too. At the community-elected researchers' initiative, the project ultimately included interviews with a broad—but not random—cross-section of each community that aimed to be inclusive for age, gender, year of arrival, and political affiliation, both in terms of community politics and national politics. Mayer's proposal centered community life within a particular geographic space and across a more distant range of historical experiences. In doing so, it would have excluded histories of mobility that have always shaped the communities and made them so dynamic. It also would have excluded young community members' second-hand knowledge of histories and experience of more recent change in the communities, which the community-elected researchers rightly valued. The results of this methodological change were enormous, as demonstrated in the importance of mobility as a theme in this chapter.

In the end, interviews were conducted in total with 86 individuals. Three non-community members were interviewed at the suggestion of the community-elected researchers, and several interviewees did not identify as members of the same community as the community-selected researchers leading their interview. One individual was interviewed separately by researchers from both communities. On several occasions, two individuals were interviewed together at their

own choosing. Mayer also conducted several one-on-one interviews at the request of interviewees. Interviews were typically conducted in the interviewee's residence, but some interviews were held in parks or while walking through communal lands. In addition to interviews held within the urban core of San Juan de Nicaragua, interviews were conducted during trips to the Indian River areas of Encanto, Holy Land, and Canta Gallo, and in the Greytown areas of Cangrejera, Haulover, and Spanish Creek. Interviewees were asked if they wanted pseudonymity, anonymity, or the use of their real names in research products. As mentioned in the introduction, real names have been redacted for safety reasons amid the increase in government persecution of Black and Indigenous peoples in Nicaragua.

List of Place Names

The oral histories in this chapter contain many place names, some of which have also been mentioned in the preceding chapters. For ease of remembering them, a list of locations follows here:

The southeastern-most municipality of Nicaragua is known as *Greytown* or *San Juan de Nicaragua*.[3] The principal town of that municipality is formally known as Greytown but also is commonly referred to as San Juan de Nicaragua. The town was founded by refugees returning from Costa Rica in 1990. Prior to 2002, San Juan de Nicaragua was known as *San Juan del Norte*. The town is located on the right bank of the Indian River, just a few thousand feet from where the river meets the Caribbean.

Figure 1: Map of the Rama-Kriol Territory (courtesy of the Rama-Kriol Territorial Government).

After Greytown was founded in 1990, the site of the previous principal town of the municipality became known as *Old Greytown* or *San Juan Viejo*. This original town—depopulated and largely destroyed during the Contra war—was located about two miles southwest of the new Greytown on a lagoon that connects the Indian and San Juan Rivers.

The Rama community in this southernmost area of the Rama-Kriol Territory is known as *Indian River* or *Río Indio.* Most community members live in the town of Greytown, but there is a series of small Rama settlements located along the Indian River. From Greytown, the Indian River heads north, passing by the settler town of *Siempre Viva*. The river then veers west into the heart of the Indio-Maíz Biological Reserve. Along this stretch of the river, the Rama settlements are, from east to west, *Encanto*, *Holy Land* or *Tierra Santa*, *Canta Gallo*, and *Monkey Falls*, also known as *Salto La Mona* or *Indian Falls*.

The southernmost Kriol community in the Rama-Kriol Territory is also known as *Greytown*. While most community members live in the town of Greytown, the community also includes Kriol people living between the southern boundary of the territory and the Haulover area. From Spanish Creek heading north, most Kriol people are members of the community of Corn River.

Across the river from Greytown, there is a narrow, sandy strip of land between the Indian River and the Caribbean. Moving north on that strip of land, one first arrives at *Cangrejera*, an area where several Kriol and Rama community members live. Further north is *Haulover*, a predominantly Kriol area with strong links to *El Cocal*—a massive coconut plantation that operated a company town based in Haulover.

North of Haulover is *Spanish Creek*, where several more Kriol families live. More Kriol families live along the coast north of there, but the next population hub is the Kriol community of *Corn River*. The community is based at the mouth of the Corn River on the Caribbean.

North of that is the settler town of *Punta Gorda*, situated at the mouth of the Punta Gorda River. The river was once a major Rama population center together with *Cane Creek*, which is about four miles further up the coast. Next, one hits two points jutting out into the Caribbean. First is *Bangkukuk Taik* (or *Punta de Águila*), a Rama community which has the highest concentration of Rama language speakers today. The second is the Kriol community of *Monkey Point*.

Continuing on, one reaches what was once the Rama community of *Wiring Cay*, which has now been entirely displaced by settlers. The same goes for the nearby area of *Red Bank*.

Next, one will come to *Hone Sound*, which is one of two sounds that connects Bluefields Lagoon with the Caribbean. Following the southern shore of the lagoon to the west and then the north, one comes across three rivers where Rama people have historically lived: the *Torsuani*, *Dakuno*, and *Kukra Rivers*. Along the Kukra River, there are two Rama communities recognized in the Rama-Kriol Territory: first, *Tiktik Kaanu*, and second, *Sumu Kaat*.

In the lagoon itself is *Rama Cay*, a small pair of islands joined by a marshy stretch of middens where the plurality of Rama people—about 800–900—live today. Finally, proceeding north, one will reach the city of *Bluefields* on the western shore of Bluefields Lagoon.

Old Times

Indian River

Few living Rama people visited the Indian River area before the war. As discussed in the introduction to this dissertation, Rama people have, in recent memory, walked or sailed through an area stretching from Bluefields Lagoon to Turtle Bogue (Tortuguero), Costa Rica, to find new places to plant, hunt, fish, and gather. Still, by the middle of the 20th century, the main Rama population hubs at Rama Cay, Kukra River, Cane Creek, and Punta Gorda were quite a distance from the Indian River. For most Rama people, there was little reason to travel so far at a time before settler colonial dispossession began significantly constraining Rama lifeways in the 1990s. The few who did travel this far south sought a life with fewer people around and more freedom to live as they pleased.

Miss Anita and Mister Melvin have known each other almost their entire lives. Mister Melvin is a Rama man born in the mid-1940s; his father was a Spaniard (i.e., mestizo), but he was raised by his Rama mother speaking the Rama language after his father abandoned them. In his early years, he and his mother moved around in the middle and southern sections of the present-day Rama-Kriol Territory, between Punta de Águila (now renamed Bangkukuk Taik in Rama), Cane Creek, Punta Gorda, Point of Rock, and El Cocal—a massive coconut plantation right on the Caribbean near Greytown. In El Cocal, Mister Melvin's mother worked as a coconut grater. Miss Anita, five years Mister Melvin's junior, was born in Bluefields to a Miskitu–Kriol–mestizo family and grew up moving between lands her family worked in Punta de Águila, Cane Creek, and Point of Rock, where members of her family had lived for many generations. Their families often lived near each other in those times. Point of Rock was pretty then, Mister Melvin says. "Plenty animal. Plenty tiger. *Plenty* tiger! Tiger come right up to your house, come catch hog and go eat."[4]

At the age of eight, Mister Melvin set out on his own to bring in money for his family. He moved to Corn Island, some 50 miles off the coast of Bluefields, and worked on the coconut plantations and in the fishing and lobster industries. Around the age of 18, he returned to the mainland community of Punta de Águila. Miss Anita was living with her grandmother in nearby Punta Gorda. They met again in Punta de Águila and began a relationship. Soon, they sought a quieter place to live off the land and start their own family. Heading south, they stayed on Miss Anita's family's land in Point of Rock for some time. Later, they moved further south and established themselves along the Indian River. Miss Anita has fond memories of that time. "In River, we was campesino, we was for plant and fish, eat wari [white-lipped peccary], eat all them things." In those times, "While we were working, we never used to destroy. We used to take care of [the land]." Hardly anyone lived on the river in those times—probably the late 1960s or early 1970s. Only a few Spaniards, but Miss Anita and Mister Melvin never had trouble with any of them.

A Rama woman in her late 60s shared Mister Melvin and Miss Anita's warm memories of those pre-war years on the Indian River. She had returned from Costa Rica just a week before we conducted our interviews. She and her husband came up from Puerto Viejo de Talamanca, on Costa Rica's Caribbean coast, and barely stopped in San Juan de Nicaragua before heading up the Indian River to a family member's house. "I come to lay me bones here," she told us, preferring for us to write down her words instead of recording her. This place was special to her. As she got older and had more trouble moving around, she wanted to be in this place, where two of her children were raising their families and another was buried, having died here in childbirth a dozen years back.

Together with Mister Melvin, she is one of the few living Rama people who spent time down here before the Contra war. Born to a Rama mother and Mayangna father on Rama Cay, she grew up moving up and down the Kukra River. We asked why she came down here in the first place, especially without knowing anyone else living here. “I is vaga,” she said, using a Spanish word that can refer to a lazy person, but also specifically to someone who roams around. “I did want to know a [new] place.” Like many Rama people from her generation and before, she didn’t like to stay in one place for long, especially when there were new Spaniards passing up and down the Kukra River all the time. As Mister Melvin remembered it, this woman’s father had complained to Rama leaders about the Spaniards arriving on the Kukra River back in the late 1960s or early 1970s, and the leaders brought this complaint to the local judge. The Somoza government sent in the military to remove them from the area.

Still, there was too much noise there, this woman remembers. So, in the early 1970s, she and her partner made their way south, eventually reaching the mouth of the Corn River. They stayed there for some time and had a somewhat tense relationship with Corn River’s Kriol families. Eventually, one Kriol leader told them they should head further south to Indian River. He told them that the Indian River belonged to Rama people. They took his advice, finding an area of lush rainforest and abundant food. In those days, “You get plenty fish, and wari [white-lipped peccaries] come right up to the house.” They planted coconuts and breadkind,[5] though she no longer remembers where. Iibu trees grew on the higher ground by the riverbanks and poked up into the canopy; they pried its seeds its hard fruit and roasted, ground, and fermented them to make a drink called iibu bunya.[6] “Nobody here in them times,” she said, going on to name the only two families of Spaniards who lived nearby. The Spaniards didn’t cause any trouble back then. The river connected them with Old Greytown. From their visits, they knew the prominent

Kriol families, but few Kriols came this far up Indian River. In short, it had all the ingredients for good living: it was quiet, it was safe, and there was plenty to eat.

Greytown

After the failure of efforts to build an interoceanic canal from Greytown up the San Juan River at the turn of the 20th century, Old Greytown was a Kriol community living amid the remains of a formerly cosmopolitan town. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (n.d.) had once listed San Juan del Norte—the former Spanish name for Greytown—alongside New York and San Francisco as future "emporia of world trade," but by the second decade of the 20th century, the Panama Canal had made it irrelevant. The town's European and North American inhabitants largely left, and the remaining population was mostly made up of Kriol people and a few mestizo and Miskitu inhabitants. They lived among decaying Victorian houses, hotels, stores, and government buildings built of expensive hardwoods imported from North America or Europe.

Miss Sonia is a Kriol woman in her early 70s. Born in Greytown, she remembers the stories that her grandparents—and the one great-grandmother she met—would tell her. Most were born in Kingston, Jamaica, and came to Greytown to find work with the fruit companies and a failed canal project in the first decade of the 20th century. One grandparent came from the island of San Andrés, Colombia. They planted cacao, too, and grew food on a small piece of land. In Miss Sonia's childhood, Greytown was a distinctively Kriol town where people would get together to play baseball, dominoes, and kitty alley—a form of bowling played in Afro-Indigenous communities up and down the Caribbean coast of Central America. Greytown people survived off the land and sea: hunting, fishing, and farming. Some would make money by collecting rubber in the forest or by making coconut oil. Still, it was an economically depressed

place, and Miss Sonia remembers a steady outflow of residents to Costa Rica. “The majority of people in Greytown left to live in Costa Rica. I’m not talking about the ‘70s and 80s. No, I’m talking about the ‘40s, ‘50s, and ‘60s.”[7] The opportunities for wage labor were only declining in Greytown, and those who could not provide for themselves by hunting, fishing, and farming, or who chose not to do so, had to look elsewhere.

The daughter of a Somoza-era mayor of Greytown, Miss Sonia had a more cosmopolitan childhood than most children of her era. As an adolescent, her mother took her and her siblings to Managua to study. The journey took months: the first boat they took broke down at Machuca, where they waited for a month until another boat passed and brought them up the San Juan River as far as El Castillo. They spent another month in El Castillo before making the trip to San Carlos on Lake Nicaragua and then onward to Managua. She remembers the shock of seeing all the cars there. “I liked [the city], but I missed [Greytown]. I remember crying because I wanted to go back.”[8] Later on, they would move to Bluefields, where she continued her studies at the Moravian School. Miss Sonia decided to study nursing, so she traveled up to Puerto Cabezas—a predominantly Miskitu city in the present-day North Caribbean Coast Autonomous Region—to study at the nursing school established by the Moravian Church there. She wanted to practice back in Old Greytown, and she returned there in the late 1970s to work in the town’s health center.

Mister Roberto was also born in Greytown during its years of decline, but he shares Miss Sonia’s nostalgia for the pre-war times. “It was beautiful,” he told us. “In our youth, we lived more happily. We lived healthy lives because we ran around, we played out in the bush.” He remembers his father raising livestock and corn, rice, beans, and coconuts. His father owned a dryer to process the coconut copra, which soap companies in Granada and Costa Rica would buy

through intermediaries. Mister Roberto feels deeply rooted in this place; his ancestors back to his great-great-grandparents were from here. His wife, too, is a member of one of the mestizo families that lived in Old Greytown since long before the war. Even while others left the town, Mister Roberto and his family had no intention of following them.

Haulover

Haulover has a distinct history from the rest of Greytown. Its existence is integrally connected with El Cocal and with the companies that purchased the coconuts—first in the United States, and later in Nicaragua and Costa Rica. For that reason, life in Haulover has always been a bit more precarious. While Greytown people could rely on some amount of agriculture in hard times, Haulover is located on a sandy stretch of land with limited agricultural uses. Even so, Haulover has persisted, and its families have a strong identity rooted in that place.

Mister Johnny is probably the oldest living resident in the stretch of beach that used to be El Cocal. Born in Bluefields in 1936, his grandparents were from that city and Belize. He grew up with his mother until the age of 10, when he traveled down the coast to join his father in Haulover. "We was the first worker on this Cocal," he told us. "Who knows why my father came here. He came here young and he stayed here until he died. He's buried right here in Haulover."[9] In those days, hardly anyone lived in the area. "In this creek there was nobody. Only [co-author's] grandfather. His grandparents lived in Cangrejera, on the other side. Only [they] lived on the Indian River; the Indian River was nothing."[10] Though Mister Johnny and his family came from Bluefields, Old Greytown became their new hub once they were in Haulover. "I used to travel here, from Cocal, go [Old Greytown], go buy things and go back to the beach," he recalled. The roundtrip required a whole day of paddling and walking. When his stepmother was

going into labor, his father would have him go into town, find a nurse, and bring her back to Haulover for the birth—if they arrived in time.

In our interview, Mister Johnny focused especially on the labor he and his family did on El Cocal. When he and his father arrived there, El Cocal was the property of the Bluefields Mercantile Company, which itself was owned by the Guaranty Trust Company. Guaranty Trust was one of the U.S. banks that effectively took over the Nicaraguan banking system in the 1910s with the support of the U.S. government's imperial machinery (Hudson 2017, 154–75). As these banks withdrew from Nicaragua during the Great Depression, the Bluefields Mercantile Company was one of the last companies owned directly by the banks that had intervened decades earlier (Cuadra Cea 1963). Working at El Cocal in those days was extraordinarily difficult work. "We grated coconut by hand," Mister Johnny told us. At the time, El Cocal had no equipment to dry copra; everything was done manually. "Yes, man. Grating coconut by hand isn't any old thing!"[11] Years later, Swedish immigrant Emil Brautigam acquired the Bluefields Mercantile Company. Emil came to the Mosquito Reserve from Sweden in the 1880s. Over the following decades, he was involved in nearly every business on the coast that exported to the U.S., including lumber, bananas, sugar, rice, coconuts, and gold (Vernooy 1992, 242–49). Emil put his son, Harry Brautigam Moody,[12] in charge of El Cocal, and most Haulover people remember Harry as the pre-war owner. Mister Johnny remembers the labor becoming a bit less horrible: "It was mechanized after Harry Brautigam bought it."[13] Still, Haulover was essentially a company town. Mister Johnny recalls, "People who lived on this coast had to work. There were no bums (vagos) here! If you're not working at El Cocal, get out!"[14] Mister Johnny is keenly aware that these histories of hard labor in the old times are disappearing. "The truth is," he said, "the things I am telling you, nobody else can tell you. … When we grated coconuts here—there's no other

person who is here on this land now who worked at that time. Not one." Many of the other workers have passed away, and those who haven't have all moved away, mostly to Costa Rica. Mister Johnny wants the story told.

Mister William is well established as a community leader in Greytown, but both sides of his family are known as Haulover people. One of eight siblings, Mister William was born in the late 1950s in Old Greytown. Though he identifies as Kriol, three of his four grandparents were Miskitu. He tells stories of his Miskitu paternal grandfather over a cup of criminal—breadfruit boiled in coconut milk and mashed with sugar and spices. This grandfather was a famed medicine man from the Kahkabila community in the Pearl Lagoon basin north of Bluefields. One day, his grandfather was out collecting firewood and was struck by lightning. He was unconscious for three days; when he awoke, he had gained the ability to tell people what ailed them and how to cure it using traditional medicine. He became known as the Prophet and received visitors from all over the Caribbean coast and beyond. Other grandparents came from Bluefields and the Wangki River area along the border with Honduras. His maternal grandfather was from Jamaica, and his maternal grandmother was a Miskitu woman from the north. They lived in Bluefields for a time and then moved down to Old Greytown in search of work. They bought a house in Old Greytown and a parcel of land in Haulover just north of El Cocal, paddling between the two places.

Though Mister William was born in Old Greytown, he grew up in the care of his grandmother in Haulover. Like Mister Johnny, he recalls Haulover as a company town in those days. "Nobody wasn't owner of nothing. Only company." He continued, "Nobody planted, nobody sold anything. Everything was [dependent] on the company. The company gave you a house, gave you a latrine, gave you a well, and had a big cafeteria. … Every month you had to

pay for your food. Fifty córdobas (roughly US$40 today) each month."[15] Pay was little and inconsistent: "You earned eight córdobas (roughly US$6.43 today) each day. Every Sunday, that's what they would pay you. And if you miss a day, you miss Sunday. Yes, there's nothing. And the pay was for peeling a thousand coconuts." Mister William started peeling coconuts at the age of 13, but he had worked hauling coconuts by mule even before that. Still, Mister William has some nostalgia for those days. He remembers the company Christmas, when the company would give workers 15 days of vacation and put on a four-day party. But the most important source of Mister William's nostalgia had little to do with the company. "I would want those times to come back again," he told us, "because those lands are now being invaded."[16] In his analysis, were the Brautigams still there, settlers would not be able to take land from such economically and politically powerful people.

Wartime

Sandinista forces triumphed against the Somoza dictatorship in July 1979, but Old Greytown and the coastal areas south of Bluefields hardly experienced the preceding conflict that ravaged the western half of Nicaragua. As Sandinista cadres arrived on the Caribbean coast, the revolution began to affect Rama and Kriol people's lives in a variety of ways over the next few years.

Mister Roberto could not possibly forget the day the revolution reached Old Greytown. At the age of 19, he was a reservist in Somoza's National Guard there in Old Greytown alongside Miss Sonia's brother, Mister Miguel. While reservists there received training and equipment, they did not participate in the horrific violence that the National Guard used in

western Nicaragua in their failed attempt to put down the rebellion. For Mister Roberto, the revolution marked the start of a sad time:

> It was sad because we were reservists and they threw us in jail. When the Sandinistas triumphed, they threw us in jail, about 15 of us. Afterward they let us go, but they kept an eye on us. But it was sad. … [W]e were saved because a good commander arrived, because if it had been someone else, they would have killed us, and that's that. Yes, a good Sandinista commander. So, we were saved.[17]

While Mister Roberto's prior affiliation with the National Guard made him a target under Sandinista rule, many other Rama and Kriol people greeted the revolution with cautious optimism. Most Rama people living in the Indian River community today who were alive at the time of the revolution were living in the north of the Rama-Kriol Territory back then. One Rama man in his late 60s recalls:

> After the Frente [FSLN] win, they reach to Rama Cay. We young boy all the time want to be [in the middle of things]. So we get in [in the middle of] the military, and the boss man come to we and say, "Unu[18] no know se[19] all of this is [yours]?" So we ask him, "All this like what?" He say, "The land, the sea, the gold, all the richness here. Unu is the owners. But Somoza was a bad man. Somoza never want unu know about this." And we say, "Yeah? That sound good." So him say we have to work with them because them want to recognize we, say that we is the owner of this territory, we is owner of all the resources them. And so, yeah, sound good.

This man participated in gatherings of leaders from across the Caribbean coast, which ultimately contributed to the formation of the organization Miskitu, Sumu,[20] Rama, Sandinista United (MISURASATA) under predominantly Miskitu leadership. MISURASATA facilitated an effort to conduct a literacy campaign in the languages of the Caribbean coast and produce a map of Indigenous territorial claims for which MISURASATA sought state recognition (Baracco 2012).

The revolution took some time to arrive at El Cocal. Mister William was working there when Sandinista forces arrived and told the workers that they would no longer have to work under such terrible conditions. "We said, that sounds good," he told us. El Cocal was expropriated by the government and placed in the hands of the Ministry of Agricultural

Development, which gradually extended the plantation northward (Vernooy 1992, 118, n. 16). As the counterrevolution began, the nascent Sandinista Popular Army provided military training to the workers so they could defend themselves and the plantation. The plantation was eventually renamed after Kriol Sandinista Enrique Campbell, who had been killed in a Contra attack in 1982.

Within two years, relations between the central government and Afro-Indigenous peoples on the Caribbean coast had soured. Tensions arose as MISURASATA sought greater influence and autonomy on the Caribbean coast and the central government became concerned that it was losing control to a separatist movement. This came to a head when government security forces arrested key MISURASATA leaders in February 1981, including Steadman Fagoth and Brooklyn Rivera (Baracco 2012, 382). Shortly thereafter, the Contra war—previously more limited to Nicaragua's Pacific and central highland areas—fully arrived on the Caribbean coast. Fagoth, escaping to Honduras, formed a band of Indigenous Contras that received support from the Central Intelligence Agency. Rivera, on the other hand, initially remained in Nicaragua, seeking to resume his work with the FSLN government (Macdonald 1984). In August 1981, Rivera broke with the government; the following year, he formed his own group of Afro-Indigenous rebels who were less aligned with the U.S. (Prévost 1987). Assuming the MISURASATA name, Rivera's group linked up with former FSLN leader Edén Pastora, who had formed the Democratic Revolutionary Alliance (ARDE) in a self-proclaimed effort to rescue the Sandinista revolution from the authoritarian Marxist-Leninists he believed were dominant in the government (Volman 1984). MISURASATA and ARDE set up their bases in Costa Rica—just south of the San Juan River. They would launch attacks across the San Juan River and along the southern Caribbean coast.

For civilians in Old Greytown, the war's impact was sudden and completely upended their lives. Rumors circulated that ARDE could launch an attack at any time. "Ah, it was terrible. Terrible," Mister Roberto remembered. "Everyone thought that they could bomb the town at any time."[21] Gradually, the population of Old Greytown fled the town. Mister Roberto narrated his flight to us:

> When we fled, it was sad because [the Army] pursued us. … I was the guide for five families, and they followed us, but it became more important to them that the Contras were there at the mouth of the San Juanillo [River]. … They killed several people, the ones who came after us. … The rest of us fled to Costa Rica.[22]

Most of the population of Greytown escaped to Costa Rica, but some stayed until it was possible to flee. "We were the last ones who escaped," Mister Roberto recalled. "After that, the others couldn't escape. But [the Army] rounded them up and brought them to San Carlos," the city at the origin of the San Juan River on Lake Nicaragua. From there, some remained in Nicaragua, and others fled to Costa Rica. "By the time the Contra bombed the town, they took control of it, but there was almost nobody there,"[23] Mister Roberto said.

One of the Contras operating in the area was Mister William. After receiving training in weapons and military tactics from the Sandinistas, Mister William describes becoming disenchanted with the revolutionary government. "We came to understand what it was," he told us.[24] Mister William and others began meeting in secret with ARDE, with Mister William as the leader. They hatched a plan in which they held a birthday party, got the military guards at Haulover drunk, and escaped at night. "Four days later, we had to return right there to fight,"[25] he recalled. Gradually, they took over a stretch of the coast ranging from Cangrejera to Corn River, where they had their base with a large group of civilians.

They operated from that base for about a year. Then, in the middle of 1984, the Army launched an invasion, and Mister William's group ran out of ammunition.

> Four days in the bush. Four, in Corn River. … The majority of the people there at the time of the invasion fell. … The problem was the civilians. We had to gather all those who were nearby. [One] part stayed. [The other] part went into the bush, slept in the bush, … and on the third day, [we crossed] into Costa Rica … with more than a hundred people.[26]

At that point, the survivors in the group joined the refugees who had fled from Old Greytown the preceding year.

Once people like Mister Roberto, Miss Sonia, Mister Melvin, Miss Anita, and Mister William made it to Costa Rica, they were met by immigration authorities and staff from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) who recorded their information and gave them about four options of refugee camps. Of the Kriol and Rama people with whom we spoke, all opted for the refugee camp in Limón—a Caribbean coast city with deep historical and cultural ties with the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua. Miss Sonia remembers a camp full of people from all over the coast. We asked her what the conditions were like.

> It was like a concentration camp …. At the start, it was very difficult because it was a matter of adapting—of adapting to a new culture, a different way of living. We had been free; we didn't have to ask for permission to leave. At the beginning, we couldn't leave and go to the neighborhoods of Limón …. [T]hey had [it] closed off with barbed wire, and there at the gate, there was a [security guard], police, there was an immigration office. There was a health center, there was the administration. So, it was all well organized, but there was no freedom. … There were many problems with prejudices, with discrimination. They look at you like any sickness, any outbreak—"It's the refugees!"[27]

Even so, Miss Sonia said, it was better than being back in Old Greytown. Over time, the situation improved; they received better food and better clothes, and they created a church in the camp. Over time, the barriers between refugees and Costa Rican citizens were diminished, and refugees were allowed to leave the camp to work. Miss Sonia eventually worked for the Ministry of Health. Mister William learned carpentry and worked on fishing boats. Others worked on the docks or as tour guides.

Not everyone in the communities who stayed aligned with the Contras. Mister Freddy, a cousin of Mister William, grew up in a large family in Haulover and worked at El Cocal. Mister Freddy was only 13 when the war became devastatingly intimate. He was near the cafeteria at El Cocal when Contra forces launched their attack on Corn River. He saw his father's boat—just off the coast from him—when it was fired upon and broke apart. He recalls screaming at his father to swim. As his father struggled in the waves, Mister Freddy saw a shark attack him, and he disappeared. After that, Mister Freddy says he decided to join the militia. He signed up in part because he liked guns, and in part because, "Shit, if you don't join, you're going to die. That's how I joined. I grabbed a gun by my own free will."[28]

In 1984, Mister Freddy participated in some of the most intense action of the war in southeastern Nicaragua. The government launched an all-out attack on ARDE and MISURASATA in early 1984—the same time when Mister William's group fled Costa Rica. Mister Freddy participated in the attack on La Penca, an ARDE base on the Nicaraguan side of the San Juan River. His unit traveled up and down the San Juan River before going back to the coast to try to take back Corn River. When he moved in, a Contra unit captured Mister Freddy and several others. Among the unit's members was Mister Freddy's late older brother. Mister Freddy and his comrades were held for a matter of hours before government forces caught up and attacked. Mister Freddy seized the moment to flee. One of the Contras began firing on him, but he heard his brother tell them to let him go. Mister Freddy rescued another member of his unit who had fled and then found his way back to the Army. Later on, Mister Freddy would become a fast-boat driver for the military, serving a total of 10 years in the armed forces.

Many of the Rama people in the Indian River community today were in the northern part of the territory during the war. Contras operated in the Bluefields area, including the lagoon and

the rivers feeding into the lagoon where Rama people lived. Those who lived on the rivers spent those years fleeing violence from all sides. For Soraya, a Rama woman in her mid-40s, her memory of the war time immediately turned to the difficulty of constantly trudging through swampy areas, often under cover of night. She and her family were in the Torsuani and Kukra Rivers. “Only water,” she says, remembering the soles of her feet peeling off from being constantly wet. “We did dead with cold. We did dead with hungry.”

Rama Cay was a hotspot for the conflict. The island was a strategic point for its proximity to Bluefields, and Rama Contras could sneak onto and off of the island with relative ease. Despite the best efforts of Rama leader Rufino Omier and Moravian pastor Rev. Cleveland McCrea to keep the island neutral territory, in July 1984, ARDE forces launched a full invasion of the island. Many of the occupiers were themselves Rama. The island’s civilian population largely evacuated to Bluefields, where they lived under terrible conditions as refugees. After they had left, the Army bombed and then occupied the island—only to find that the Contras had already left (Kinzer 1984).

In that raid and others, the Contras took Rama captives with them back into the bush. One of them was Diana, now in her early 50s. She had fled to Bluefields with her family, but she and a group of other young people returned to Rama Cay one day to pick cockles. “That time when the bad man did catch we now. They gone with we in the bush,” Diana told us. This group of Contras was a mix of ARDE and MISURASATA members: “Nation mixed with we own Indian people what used to [be] up in the bush who get about gun.” She spent eight months in the bush with the Contras. “What [are they going to] feed you? They no get nothing to eat. No, we used to starve … there [in] the bush.” Eventually, she and other civilians with this group were captured

by the Army in the Kukra River area and brought back to Bluefields. Her sister, however, disappeared, and nobody in Diana's family has seen her since the war.

For Diana, the war was a senseless conflict. She told us, quoting a friend who had abandoned the Contras, "To go take gun again [in the] bush, that['s] no life." This is a sentiment that was shared by many community members with whom we spoke. Though individuals tended to be more sympathetic with one side than the other in the conflict, the extraordinary violence and misery of those years strike most as having been pointless—particularly with the benefit of hindsight.

Return

In the final years of the 1980s, the war sputtered to a halt. The Contras had been worn down to the point of no longer being a viable threat to the FSLN government, though they continued their attacks. On the Caribbean coast, the government began negotiations with Afro-Indigenous leaders in an effort to end the eastern front of the war. Some of those negotiations and consultations took place in Bluefields and on Rama Cay, where Indian River community members like Soraya and Miss Elena remember witnessing discussions with a sense of optimism. Amid a feast that included plenty of turtle meat, Soraya recalls, "Me [did] see it good in them time[s]." One ex-Contra from Haulover who fled to Costa Rica later in the war remembers that leaders like Brooklyn Rivera came to the refugee camp in Limón to discuss the autonomy proposal, too. In 1987, the autonomy law was approved, and the war on the Caribbean coast had essentially ended.

Hard times did not end with the war. The year after the autonomy law passed, Hurricane Joan struck Nicaragua's southern Caribbean coast, destroying most of the houses on Rama Cay

and in Bluefields. In total, more than a hundred people were killed, and nearly 200,000 people were left without homes (Envío Team 1988). People on the coast now had to rebuild not only from the war, but also from a catastrophic natural disaster. Meanwhile, inflation surged above 14,000 percent in 1988 due to the Contra war and U.S. embargo (Rocha 2007). For those Rama and Kriol people living in the forests, the hurricane was also a disaster for their lifeways. It destroyed homes and crops, killed livestock, and felled trees that made hunting and fishing areas inaccessible. For people who had taken refuge in Bluefields or Costa Rica, the hurricane delayed their return home.

Among the very first people to return to the present-day areas of the Indian River and Greytown communities were workers at El Cocal. After having shut down amid Contra attacks in 1983, the state company operating El Cocal started up again around 1988. We spoke with one Rama man who had worked at El Cocal before the war and was one of the former workers who returned in 1988. The conditions were still difficult, he told us; the plantation's state ownership location right on the coast made it a target for occasional attacks by Contras who continued fighting. But he wanted to work. They were armed to defend themselves and the plantation.

With the 1990 electoral victory of an opposition coalition led by Violeta Barrios de Chamorro, the war quieted down further. In the refugee camp in Limón, some Old Greytown residents had started new lives in Costa Rica, but many were eager to get back to Nicaragua as soon as possible. UNHCR and the Nicaraguan and Costa Rican governments supported a first effort to re-establish Old Greytown in June 1990. About 25–30 families—both Kriol and mestizo—had representatives on the expedition. Mister Roberto was one of them. "We didn't want to be in Costa Rica anymore," he told us. "Those of us who came … wanted [to be back at home with] our families."[29] They returned on a large boat with food and supplies, not knowing

exactly what to expect. What they found was their nightmares come to life. “They burn it, the town,” Mister Roberto remembered. “Nobody knows if it was the FSLN or if it was the Contras who burned it, but when we came back in 1990 to reestablish [the town] when we entered, there was nothing. All of it had been burned.”[30] The town remained strewn with the remnants of war: trenches, bodies, and landmines. The mines were the most difficult obstacle. Miss Sonia, who remained in Costa Rica, remembers hearing that a team of European specialists came to deactivate the mines. “But even so,” she told us, “it wasn’t a suitable place to live.”[31] The returning families decided to find a new location to rebuild the town. They selected a piece of land on the Indian River owned by the Mena–Solórzano family that had once been a farm known as Santa Isabel.

Narratives of the early days of the new Greytown tend to describe both the difficulty of getting re-established and the beauty and abundance of the place. Mister Roberto remembers that a good number of the families who arrived in 1990 turned back after seeing the conditions. Mister Miguel remembers that those who stayed received construction materials and tools from UNHCR. A surveyor allocated lots to the families, and each family cleared their lot and built their house. UNHCR also guaranteed food and education for the first two years. Though reconstruction itself was difficult, the returnees had no trouble finding food. The rivers and sea were abundant with guapotes (*Parachromis dovii*), tubas (*Tomocichla tuba*), machacas (*Brycon guatemalensis*), jacks (*Caranx hippos*), snooks (*Centropomus* spp.), and river shrimp (*Macrobrachium carcinus*). Wari (white-lipped peccaries), gibnuts (pacas), and curassows would come right up to the town and were easy to hunt. Coconuts were abundant, and within the first year, the residents could harvest rice, beans, corn, and breadkind, making them increasingly self-sufficient.

At the end of the war, Rama people in the north faced decisions on where to rebuild their lives. While Rama people had long moved through the territory in search of better livelihoods, there were several new considerations in the postwar period. First, Hurricane Joan had made subsistence more difficult in the north of the territory, where it had hit hardest. Second, the new Chamorro government almost immediately began settling mestizo ex-combatants and displaced people in settlements on the Caribbean coast, including within and immediately surrounding the northern portions of the future Rama-Kriol Territory. This included the settler community of San Francisco, located on the Kukra River. These new settlers enclosed communal lands and further reduced Rama-Kriol options for subsistence.

These push factors from the north of the territory were paired with three pull factors in the south. First, Rama ex-combatants had gotten to know the southern portion of the territory during the war and told families in the north about the lush abundance of the region—a stark comparison with the north after the hurricane and amid ex-combatant resettlements. Second, word reached the north about opportunities for wage labor in the south. The biggest of these was El Cocal, but the mid-1990s also saw increasing opportunities for work in the tourist operations run by Costa Rican physician Alfredo López near Old Greytown. Third, the 1987 Nicaraguan constitution autonomy law included strong, if vague, language guaranteeing Indigenous peoples the right to communal lands and to the use and enjoyment of waters and forests. Considering how this would be put into practice, some Rama people foresaw a need to stake a claim to historically important areas through occupation, leading to something of a back-to-the-land movement.

The result of these push and pull factors was a steady flow of Rama relocation from Rama Cay and Kukra River to the south. After the first Rama worker returned to El Cocal in

1988, several Rama people journeyed down around 1990, including members of at least four families. For most of them, their first major stop was Corn River, where they found several Kriol families that had stayed through the war or recently returned. Some stayed for a few days; others lived with the longtime Kriol residents there for months or years. Heading further south, most of the families ended up at El Cocal, where the men and boys went to work on the plantation. In the early 1990s, the Chamorro government returned El Cocal to the Brautigam family, and Miss Sonia and Mister Miguel's uncle served as foreman.

Emilio, now in his mid-40s, was a teenager when his family relocated from the Torsuani River to Corn River and then from Corn River to Cangrejera. His father had first come down to El Cocal years earlier with several other Rama men. They worked there for a short while before heading north again. Emilio's family moved around for a few years more before making their way to Cangrejera. They spent about two years working there. Emilio carried coconuts to Haulover to be processed; another brother husked coconuts for around double his wages. He has mixed feelings about the work. "Sure, it [was] good, because people … could find [what to] eat," he says. El Cocal being a company town, the workers could always be assured that they would have food at the cafeteria at a rate proportionate to their wages. But the wages were "very cheap," Emilio told us. In the end, the family decided to cross over to the Indian River and live off the territory. Emilio recalls his desire to leave El Cocal. "You get plenty people who really only like work [for] money. But … me no like people [saying], 'You have to do that.' … When you work [for yourself], you go the hours [that] you want [to] go." He was eager for his family to live on their own terms along the river.

Miss Susana and Mister Henry, now in their early 80s, were among the parents in that first group of Rama families to journey south after the war. The two of them grew up on the

Torsuani River. In his youth, Mister Henry had worked with other young Rama men as a lumberjack in the logging camps in Kurinwas, located near the northern limit of the South Caribbean Coast Autonomous Region. Later, he worked collecting chicle and rubber and hunted jaguars to sell their skins. During the war, Miss Susana and Mister Henry eked out an extremely precarious existence along the Torsuani and Kukra Rivers. After the war and Hurricane Joan, they were eager to find a different part of the territory where they could start anew. They had heard about the Indian River: a place of abundance that belonged to the Rama people. Miss Susana, Mister Henry, their children, and their children's partners loaded into small boats and made their way south by sailing and paddling. After spending a few days in Corn River, they arrived on the Indian River, building a house and planting their breadkind. After about a month, Mister Henry fell ill, causing them to return to the north. Ten years later, after receiving threats from settlers on the Torsuani River, the family returned definitively to the Indian River.

Soraya is Miss Susana and Mister Henry's daughter-in-law. In her interview with us, she narrated the extended family's philosophy when they established themselves on the river around 1990 and 2000. Soraya's voiced this philosophy as the words of Mister Henry:

> Henry said, "We didn't come down to clear a big area. We only came to plant our breadkind," he said. But not to make some big destruction on the land. We cleared only a little garden. That's how we plant our breadkind. "That's why we went through the effort of coming to the Indian River," he said. "We didn't come to destroy; we came to mind it." That's what he liked to say. "The Spaniard doesn't like to see us minding it," he said. "They say the Rama is lazy," he said. "The Rama isn't lazy," he said. "The Rama knows how to protect this," he said. And we followed what he taught us. Sons, daughters—none of us destroyed the place. We say that we came to mind the place, not to destroy it. Neither the animals nor the trees. Nothing in the forest. "That," he said, "is what we came to mind. That's not true of the Spaniards," he said. "They take the land," he said, "because the Ramas are lazy. The Ramas don't want to work," he said. "But the Ramas don't work to destroy," he said. "The Ramas only work to live," he said.[32]

Soraya's telling of her family's philosophy flips the settler use of Lockean ideas of property, wherein property rights are gained by infusing labor into land. Settlers justify their expropriation

of Rama-Kriol lands through the racialized accusation that Afro-Indigenous people do not work the land adequately; they say Rama and Kriol people are too lazy to cut down the trees and clear a large area. Mister Henry—voiced through Soraya—says that it is the settlers who do not know how to work properly in the forest. Kriol people articulated parallel ideas in our interviews. For example, Spanish Creek resident Miss Estefanía contrasted the behavior of settlers—"Back there they are causing destruction"[33]—with the behavior of Kriol residents: "We have minded the forest."[34] Rama and Kriol people *are* infusing their labor into the territory; their labor is *minding*—caring for—the territory.

Why mind the territory? Soraya and others provide two reasons. First, as Soraya told us, "We [Rama people] think about the children who will come after us."[35] Minding the territory is a matter of intergenerational justice and of ensuring the wellbeing of one's own descendants. Second, the duty to mind the territory is in part derived from a sense of moral responsibility to care for the animals and plants in the territory—a Rama-Kriol grounded normativity (Coulthard and Simpson 2016). In our interviews, discussions of actual or potential violations of this responsibility drew a consistent response in Rama Cay Creole: "Poor thing." For example, in a conversation with Emilio about spider monkeys, Mayer asked if people living on the river ever hunt them. He answered, "No, we no hunt them, because poor thing." Likewise, when a Rama woman whose keeps a largely vegetarian diet was asked if she eats fish, she told us, "We hardly eat fish, poor thing." Similarly, Miss Estefanía described the impacts of Hurricane Otto in 2016 through an extended narrative of returning home from a shelter in Greytown and seeing a spider monkey on the ground with her infant: "Hearing the motor, she lifted her gaze and looked again and stayed there. I cried that day. I said to [a family member], 'Look at her. She's suffering,

thinking, "Where am I going to sleep with my child?"' I said. But many people don't stop to think about the animals in the forest…"[36]

The practice of minding the territory takes many forms. Miss Estefanía, immediately after her narrative of the spider monkey, described a Kriol man who had befriended a Baird's tapir. Soraya, again talking about earlier times on the river, offered another illustrative anecdote:

> Baird's tapirs used to come into our yard. Monkeys used to reach into the house to eat bananas. … They used to like to fight you for that banana. You can't hang up bananas … because they would get them. They would go in and fight you for those ripe bananas. Lots of animals used to come in those times. Inside, the old man (Mister Henry) used to work, and he used to hang up a whole bunch of bananas for the monkeys to eat because he liked to see the animals, too. Lots of animals used to come in those times.[37]

When Emilio discussed minding the territory, he described confronting settlers who were hunting white-lipped peccaries, putting himself at risk for them. Diego, a Rama forest ranger living on the Indian River, described planting extra corn specifically for the Baird's tapirs to eat. These actions responded to ideas of moral responsibility to non-humans in the territory, and, in doing so, they produce a sense of territorial belonging.

Over the three decades since work resumed at El Cocal, Greytown was founded, and Rama people began establishing themselves on the Indian River, the Rama and Kriol population in the region has grown. More residents of Old Greytown have returned from Costa Rica, and more Rama and Kriol people from elsewhere in the territory and beyond have become integrated into the Indian River and Greytown communities. A fledgling tourism sector brought many Rama people in particular; Alfredo López hired Rama people to build and staff his Rio Indio Lodge, an upscale hotel located near Old Greytown that specializes in fishing and adventure trips. Despite a constant stream of complaints from workers about wage theft and a disastrous decrease in visitors after the 2018 crisis in Nicaragua and the COVID-19 pandemic, a skeleton crew of several Rama people continue working at the Lodge. More recent Spanish Creek and

Haulover arrivals like Miss Estefanía, who came in 2004, and Álvaro, who came in 2017, ended up in the area with no intention of staying permanently, but the calm way of life between the forest and the sea drew them in. Álvaro, who was born in Bluefields and spent 25 years in Costa Rica, told us laughingly that Mister Freddy tricked him into coming down with him. When we asked him if he wanted to go back north, he told us, "No, it cool down here, man. … I is Rasta man. I like [to] live [this way]."

Conclusion: Narrating Rama-Kriol Political Thought

Over the past century, Greytown and Indian River area have long provided contradictory offerings to Afro-Indigenous people. On the one hand, they have been home to exploitation and violence, including failed canal projects, hard labor on El Cocal, the Caribbean front of the Contra war, and withheld wages in the tourism sector. This is racialized and gendered exploitation and violence; it has been made possible through global and historical acts of colonization, enslavement, and dispossession that relied upon, and are constitutive of, racial and gender ideologies. On the other hand, the ability to live autonomously in the territory in this area has made it a sort of shatter zone, to borrow from James C. Scott (2009)—a refuge from state power and the necessity of wage labor. From the Rama "vaga" who just wanted to "know a [new] place" to Álvaro's recent decision to settle permanently in Haulover, Rama and Kriol people have found this area of their territory to be a refuge from settler colonial capitalism and its constant motion toward greater enclosures and destruction.

Over the past decade, settlers have arrived in growing numbers in the titled communal lands of the Greytown and Indian River communities, often forcing Rama and Kriol people off these lands under threats of violence and causing widespread ecological damage.[38] Our oral

history interviews took place within this context. As Dian Million (2009), Shannon Speed (2019), and the Latina Feminist Group (2001) have demonstrated, narratives like those discussed in this chapter are not merely texts to be analyzed from a distance for historical analysis. Rather, these narratives are themselves theoretical interventions rooted in the lived and felt experiences of Rama and Kriol people. Interviewees far exceeded direct answers to our questions; instead, they provided experiential political thought that has something to say about how to conjure territory in the context of a settler colonial catastrophe.

We wish to conclude with a summary of several of key areas of political thought that emerged in this chapter and could be further developed in future community-collaborative analyses of these narratives. The first is the relationship between territory and freedom. In many of the narratives described in this chapter, access to territory—its soil, water, air, and life—was key to good living with greater freedom from the racialized and gendered forms of violence and exploitation under fractally recursive, settler colonial capitalism. Second, these narratives demonstrate a communal inclusivity—around family history, region of origin, party politics, participation in the war, etc.—that can serve as a basis for broad solidarity in the face of racialized and gendered violence and dispossession. Third and finally, these narratives articulated a moral responsibility for the wellbeing of the territory and the life it contains that directly confronts and condemns settler colonial ideologies of destruction-based property.

Notes

[1] The Rama and Kriol co-authors' names have been removed due to safety concerns. Author contribution statement: Indian River and Greytown co-authors and J. L. Mayer, research design, data collection, and data analysis; J. L. Mayer, transcriptions, translations, and manuscript preparation.

[2] Specifically, a Social Science Research Council International Dissertation Research Fellowship, as acknowledged in the front matter of this dissertation.

[3] In 2002, the Nicaraguan state formally recognized the English/Kriol name as Graytown—a misspelling of the original Greytown, named for the British colonial governor of Jamaica, Sir Charles Edward Grey. In this dissertation, the original spelling is used for the sake of clarity across historical periods.

[4] Jaguars (*Panthera onca*) are known as tigers in Miskito Coast and Rama Cay Creoles and auma. They are also called tigres in colloquial Spanish in the region. In the traditional Rama cosmovision, they serve as a key conduit in relations between humans and non-humans. In old times, Rama spiritual leaders known as turmalas would go to hidden, isolated houses in the bush and drink pepper chocolate to communicate with tigers, which could provide information about the future (Loveland 1975, 395–96). The tiger spirit, also known as auma in Rama, is a paternal spirit associated with hunting and with Rama stories about the creation of the world. Rama people have also called Rama the "tiger language"—sometimes disparagingly—and have referred to people living in the bush as "tiger people" (Grinevald 2005).

[5] Breadkind refers to starchy foods, including plantains, breadfruit, cassava, coco (*Xanthosoma*; no standard word in English; malanga in Spanish), and dasheen (*Colocasia esculenta*; taro in English).

[6] *Dipteryx oleifera* is known as iibu in Rama Cay Creole, ibo in Miskito Coast Creole, and almendro in Spanish. Bunya is derived from Miskitu via Rama and refers to any of a number of starchy drinks.

[7] "La mayoría de la gente de Greytown fueron a vivir en Costa Rica. Pero no me estoy refiriendo a los 70, 80. No, estoy hablando de los 50, de los años 40, por ahí, 60."

[8] "Me gusto [la ciudad], pero me hacía falta [Greytown]. Recuerdo que llorábamos porque queríamos regresar."

[9] "¿Quién sabe por qué vino mi padre aquí? Eso vino joven y se quedó aquí hasta que se murió. Ahí está enterrado en Haulover."

[10] "En este caño no había nadie. Sólo el abuelo de él [co-autor]. Los abuelos de él vivían en Cangrejera, otro lado. Sólo él vivía en río Indio. Ese río Indio no era nada."

[11] "Sí hombre. ¡Rayar cocos a mano no es cualquier cosa!"

[12] Not to be confused with his son, Harry Brautigam Ortega, who served as president of the Central American Bank of Economic Integration.

[13] "Esto se puso con máquinas después de que Harry Brautigam lo compró."

[14] "La gente que vivía en esta costa tenía que estar trabajando. Aquí no había vagos. Si usted no está trabajando en este Cocal, ¡fuera!"

[15] "Nadie sembraba, nadie vendía nada. Todo era [dependiente] de la compañía. La compañía te daba casa, te daba letrina, te daba pozo, y tenía comisariato grande. … Tenía que pagar comida. Cincuenta córdobas al mes."

[16] "Me gustaría que regresen esos tiempos porque ahora las tierras están siendo invadidos."
[17] "Eso fue triste. Porque nosotros éramos reservas y nos echaron preso. A triunfar los sandinistas nos echaron preso como a quince de nosotros. Sí. Ahí estuvimos como diez días presos en el pueblo. Después ya nos soltaron, pero nos siguieron vigilando. … [N]os salvamos porque llegó un comandante bueno, porque si fuera otro, nos fuera matado, y eso es todo. Sí, un comandante bueno de los sandinistas. Entonces, nos salvamos."

[18] "Unu," from the Igbo ụ́nụ, is the second person plural in Miskito Coast and Rama Cay Creoles, among other English-based Caribbean creoles.

[19] "Se" or "say" is a complementizer in many English-based Caribbean creoles that introduces references to speech, perception, and judgement. It serves a similar purpose to, and may be used alternately with, the word "that" in a phrase like, "They said that…" Its origin is disputed; some argue it derives from the word "se" in the Twi dialect of the Akan language, in which it serves a similar grammatical purpose, but others argue that it derives from the English verb "to say" (Frajzyngier 1984).

[20] Sumu is a Miskitu-language exonym for the Mayangna and Ulwa peoples. It has fallen out of favor; Mayangna and Ulwa are now generally preferred.

[21] "Ah, era terrible. Terrible. Todos pensando que en cualquier momento llegaban a bombardear el pueblo."

[22] "La huida de nosotros fue triste porque [los del Ejército] nos persiguieron. … Yo era el guía de esas cinco familias y nos siguieron, pero ya valió más que estaba la Contra ahí en la boca del [río] San Juanillo. … Mataron a varios, los que nos persiguieron. … Los otros salimos para Costa Rica."

[23] "Nosotros fuimos los últimos que escapamos. De ahí los otros no pudieron escapar ya. Pero [los del Ejército] los agarraron y los llevaron para San Carlos." "Ya pues, la Contra, cuando bombardearon, la Contra se apoderó del pueblo, pero ya no había casi gente."

[24] "Llegamos a entender qué era."

[25] "A los cuatro días teníamos que regresar ahí mismo para pelear."

[26] "Cuatro días en el campo. Cuatro, en río Maíz. … La mayoría de la gente ahí en el momento cuando la invasión cayó. … Entonces, eso era [el] problema, con [los] civiles. Teníamos que recoger los que estaban cerca. [Una] parte se quedó. [Otra] parte se tiró para la montaña, dormimos en el monte, … y en el tercer día [cruzamos] para Costa Rica … con más de cien personas."

[27] Era como un campamento de concentración …. Al inicio era muy difícil porque era cuestión de adaptación—de adaptarse a una nueva cultura, a una manera diferente de vivir. Nosotros éramos libres; no teníamos que andar pidiendo permiso para salir. Al inicio no podíamos salir a los barrios de Limón …. [Lo] tenían cercado con alambre de púas, entonces ahí estaba en el portón, había guardia, policía, estaba una oficina de migración. Había un puesto de salud, estaba la administración. Entonces, todo bien organizado, pero no había libertad. Había muchos problemas de prejuicios, ¿eh?, de discriminación. Los miran a unos como, cualquier enfermedad, cualquier brote—"¡Ellos son los refugiados!"

[28] "A la verga, si no entrás, usted va a morir. Yo me entro así. Yo agarro mi arma por mi voluntad."

[29] "Ya no queríamos estar en Costa Rica. Los que vinimos … queríamos [estar en casa con] la familia ya."

[30] "Lo quemaron, el pueblo. No se sabe si fue el Frente o fue la Contra que lo quemó, pero cuando nosotros vinimos en el 90 a fundar, que entramos, ya no había nada. Todo estaba quemado."

[31] "Pero aun así, no había condiciones ahí para habitar."

[32] "Henry say, 'We no come hu make big chop down. We only come hu plant we breadkind,' he say. But hu make one destroy pon the land, no. We a chop only one little [garden] like how we plant we breadkind. 'Hu that we did fight hu come ina the Río Indio,' he say. 'We no come hu destroy; we come hu mind.' That what he like say. 'The Spaniard no like see we mind,' he say. 'Them say the Rama de lazy,' he say. 'Rama no lazy,' he say. 'Rama know how protect whata that,' him say. And we go hu whata him teach we. Son, daughter—none of we make one destroy. We say we come hu mind the place, we no come hu destroy. Ni with the animal, ni with the tree. Nothing that ina the woodland. 'That,' he say, 'we come hu mind.' 'Spaniard them, no,' he say. He say, 'They take up the land

because the Rama them lazy. The Rama them no want work,' he say. 'But Rama no work hu make destroy,' him say. 'Rama de work only hu find living,' him say."

[33] "Ahí adentro están destruyendo."

[34] "Hemos tenido el cuidado del bosque."

[35] "We [Rama] think hu we piknini who come behind."

[36] "Al oír el ruido del motor, levantó la vista y volvió a ver y se quedó así. Viera que ese día se me salió las lágrimas. Le digo a [una amiga], 'Mirala,' digo yo, 'ella está sufriendo, pensando, "¿Dónde voy a dormir con mi hijo?"' le digo yo. Pero muchas personas no se ponen a pensar en los animalitos del bosque."

[37] "The cow them used to come hu the yard. The monkey them used to reach ina the house hu eat the banana …. They used to like hu fight you hu that banana. You can't hang up banana like that because them get a. Them go in and fight you for them ripe banana. Plenty animal used to come in that time. Inside, the old man (Henry) used to work, and him used to hang up him load of banana hu the monkey them eat because him mi like see the animal them too. Plenty animal used to come in that time."

[38] Space and time constraints have not permitted us to convey and analyze the many narratives we collected on this settler colonization and its effects on Rama and Kriol people and their territory. Our future work will develop this area of our oral history research. On the effects of settler colonization on biodiversity in this area, see, for example, the work of Joel Betts and colleagues (2020; 2021).

Chapter 4: Contesting Consultation: Nicaragua's Grand Interoceanic Canal and the Limits of Recognition

Introduction

On May 3, 2016, the president of the Rama-Kriol Territorial Government (GTR-K) signed a "Free, Prior, and Informed Consent Agreement" permitting the construction of the Grand Interoceanic Canal of Nicaragua. As discussed in the introduction and Chapter 2, the canal megaproject, designed to compete with the Panama Canal, would bisect the legally titled Rama-Kriol Territory and heavily impact the lives of Indigenous Rama and Afrodescendant Kriol community members. The agreement certified that the Nicaraguan government had carried out a free, prior, and informed consultation process with the Rama-Kriol communities over the course of more than two years, thus complying with Nicaraguan and international laws establishing the state's duty to consult with Indigenous and Afrodescendant communities. Government-affiliated media published photos and videos of the signing (Prado Reyes 2016), and government officials and the GTR-K president presented it to the United Nations Special Rapporteur for the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as evidence of the canal project's compliance with international law. Hidden in this neatly packaged performance, though, was the experience of members of the nine Rama-Kriol communities: three years of heavy-handed government tactics that fostered divisions and stifled dissent in the interest of producing a final consent agreement.

Whereas the previous chapter describes the quotidian sources of Rama-Kriol freedom politics, I propose in this chapter that the national and international legal and policy regimes mandating that states consult with Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples led Nicaraguan government officials to take actions that undermined Rama-Kriol freedom. The chapter analyzes the state's legal duty to consult as an element of the formal autonomy regime for the Caribbean

coast of Nicaragua. Beyond the political autonomy formally recognized by the state of Nicaragua in Law 28, Rama-Kriol autonomy is a sense of freedom—both freedom from multiple forms of racialized violence and freedom to community self-determination. In terms of the kinds of inter-governmental dynamics analyzed in this chapter, autonomy includes elements of apartness, self-determination, and interdependency in everything from quotidian, interpersonal interactions with regional government officials to formal negotiations on projects with global implications. This chapter delves into the recent experiences of the Rama-Kriol communities in southeastern Nicaragua as the FSLN government carried out a flawed consultation on the proposed Grand Interoceanic Canal of Nicaragua.

As conceptualized at the international level, a free, prior, and informed consultation should have permitted an open conversation among community members on the relationship between the proposed project and the autonomous political economy of the Rama-Kriol Territory. Instead, the central government's desire to demonstrate that the communities had accepted the canal concession (Law 840 of 2013) led the government to pursue divide-and-conquer tactics in the communities that reduced intercommunal solidarity and, as a result, reduced Rama-Kriol autonomy more broadly. The process demonstrated that prior consultation, despite being widely discussed as an international norm, has no enforcement mechanism that would effectively require a state like Nicaragua to allow for a deliberative process reflecting the magnitude of a project like the interoceanic canal.

This case provides for novel insights in a diachronic analysis of how the Nicaraguan government's decision to pursue consultation and consent for the canal changed the Rama-Kriol communities' ability to practice autonomy. Making use of my own ethnographic research and earlier ethnographic accounts from the territory (Goett 2006; 2017), this chapter compares the

communities' responses to the most recent canal proposal with their responses to earlier threats to their autonomy—when the duty to consult was either irrelevant or ignored by the central government. This analysis indicates that the duty to consult, operating within a structure of settler colonialism and with extremely limited international enforcement, allowed the central government to perform compliance for potential investors while fostering internal divisions in the territorial government that eroded its autonomy. This indicates that such procedural measures, by failing to account for the ongoing nature of settler colonialism, further entrench settler sovereignty by diverting community energy from autonomy-building activities.

Autonomy in the Rama-Kriol Territory

The consultation process for the canal emerged from the historical and ongoing struggle for autonomy and freedom in the Rama-Kriol Territory, as in the rest of the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua. In this chapter, I am discussing autonomy in the sense described in the introduction of this dissertation—that is, as a social fact that is constructed in the communities of the Caribbean coast. Autonomy exists in the form of national and international legal instruments, but my aim here is to understand it in terms of how community members experience and discuss its effects. Recent ethnographic and theoretical literature has placed a focus on the quotidian construction and negotiation of autonomy in the Indigenous and Afrodescendant communities of the Americas. This definition of autonomy entails a combination of individual actions in day-to-day life and direct action taken at the communal, territorial, or regional level. Writing on perhaps the paradigmatic case of autonomy-as-practice in Latin America, Shannon Speed (2008b) argues that in Zapatista Chiapas, communities have taken direct action to assert their autonomy from all levels of the existing Mexican government (mal gobierno) and to build Good Governance

Councils (Juntas de Buen Gobierno). Speed's interlocutors often engage with a globalized Indigenous rights discourse, but they also articulate an understanding that state recognition is not required for the communities to practice autonomy. Instead, the exercise of "power constituted through the creative force of social struggle" is self-authorizing as an alternative basis for simultaneous rights-claiming and rights-granting actions (Speed 2008b, 167–68). Working up from a micro level, Jennifer Goett sees autonomy in the Nicaraguan Kriol community of Monkey Point as emerging in "intimate spheres of social life" and "everyday spheres of self-valorization" in which "community people draw on a reservoir of political knowledge and oppositional subjectivity grounded in a shared black diasporic experience and gendered cultural practices" (Goett 2017, 185). Similarly, writing from the Canadian settler-colonial context, Glen Coulthard argues for "a *resurgent politics of recognition* premised on self-actualization, direct actions, and resurgence of cultural practices that are attentive to the subjective and structural composition of settler-colonial power" (Coulthard 2014, 24; emphasis in original). These approaches point to the centrality of intimate practices, internalized subjectivities, and, ultimately, direct action in the formation of autonomous spaces in opposition to the racial logics of settler colonialism.

This autonomy-as-social-fact approach also connects with literature on sovereignty in Latin America and the Anglosphere. While "autonomy" and "sovereignty" are often used interchangeably across social scientific literature, Jessica Cattelino notes that this use risks reducing sovereignty to the absence of dependency, as the common use of autonomy implies. She thus provides a definition of sovereignty as both "autonomy from neocolonial interference" and a political and economic situation "forged through relations of interdependency, obligation, and reciprocity among sovereigns and peoples" (Cattelino 2008, 17). As a social fact on the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua, autonomy often contains both portions of Cattelino's definition.

For instance, the territorial government officials with whom I worked in the 2010s described their negotiations with central government officials as a critical domain for autonomous governance as sanctioned by Nicaragua's communal property law (Law 445). Likewise, Cattelino has found that members of the Seminole Tribe of Florida "enact sovereignty … by simultaneously asserting their autonomy"—that is, their lack of dependency—and, through the tribe's representative institutions, "building productive relationships with other sovereigns, relations characterized by negotiation, obligation, and interdependency" (Cattelino 2008, 177). Meanwhile, Erazo (2013) follows Cattelino's understanding of sovereignty in her ethnography of an Ecuadorian Kichwa territorial government. She finds that this territorial government reshapes the subjectivities of community members so that territorial leaders can effectively negotiate its relations with external actors, including businesses and the multiple levels of government in Ecuador. The assemblage of these subjectivities, direct actions, and institutional relations creates an appropriately complex picture of autonomy—one that resonates with the lived experiences of Rama-Kriol community members.

When negotiations between first FSLN government and Afro-Indigenous leaders on the Caribbean coast concluded with an autonomy agreement three decades ago, a simultaneous negotiation was taking shape at the International Labour Organization (ILO), where Indigenous and Afrodescendant activists were crafting an update to the assimilationist Convention 107 of 1957 (Anaya 1994). After years of discussions, the ILO approved the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention (Convention 169), which, among many other tenets, required states to "consult the peoples concerned, through appropriate procedures and in particular through their representative institutions, whenever consideration is being given to legislative or administrative measures which may affect them directly" (art. 6). This duty to consult has since been further

entrenched in the long-negotiated United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples of 2007 (UNDRIP) and in the *Saramaka v. Suriname* (2007) and *Sarayaku v. Ecuador* (2012) decisions of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. The latter decision found that the duty to consult is a "general principle of international law" that is binding on all states within its jurisdiction, including Nicaragua. Unresolved in these decisions, though, is the role of free, prior, and informed consent—a principle widely discussed in international Indigenous rights forums. Both Convention 169 and the UNDRIP establish consent as an objective of consultation processes, but the Inter-American Court has not yet determined precisely when a state must obtain free, prior, and informed consent or what appropriate sanctions for failing to do so might be. In the *Saramaka* case, the court decided that states have a duty to obtain free, prior, and informed consent for "large-scale development or investment projects," but it also noted that "the difference between 'consultation' and 'consent' in this context requires further analysis" (Saramaka People v. Suriname. Preliminary Objections, Merits, Reparations, and Costs 2007, 172:40).

Even prior to the *Saramaka* and *Sarayaku* findings, the Nicaraguan government had already adopted the duty to consult within its domestic laws. Law 445 (2003) established the duty of the authorities in the Autonomous Regions and municipalities on the Caribbean coast to conduct prior consultations with Indigenous and Afrodescendant communities prior to decisions affecting the communities. Going beyond Convention 169, Law 445 further establishes that communities may never be displaced or relocated (art. 17). In 2010, the Sandinista-controlled National Assembly also ratified Convention 169. These actions integrated consultation into Nicaragua's legal regime for Afro-Indigenous autonomy.

Ethnographic studies of the duty to consult elsewhere in Latin America over the past decade have begun to establish a critical lens through which to view this international norm, but the case studied in this chapter suggests that consultation is in fact incompatible with Afro-Indigenous freedom. While proponents argue that the full implementation of the duty to consult would "mitigate state sovereignty" and enable communities' self-determination (Anaya and Puig 2017; see also Due Process of Law Foundation 2015), ethnographic research in neoliberal Colombia and neoextractivist Bolivia has challenged the notion that the full implementation of the duty to consult could ever be implemented in a form resembling what has been described in legal instruments and court decisions. In the first place, these ethnographers argue that the duty to consult, as a typically liberal norm, ignores or even further entrenches grave power asymmetries between communities and the governments and businesses involved in consultation processes (Rodríguez-Garavito 2011; Perreault 2015; Schilling-Vacaflor 2016; 2017). Unsurprisingly, then, government and company officials have employed various forms of state power to limit dialogue in the consultation process (Rodríguez-Garavito 2011, 298–301; Perreault 2015, 446–48; Schilling-Vacaflor 2017, 668–69). When discussion is permitted, it is transmuted into a depoliticized and technical discourse that serves the purpose of silencing and excluding community members (Perreault 2015, 448). For instance, Tom Perreault describes a Bolivian consultation process in which government officials restricted topics of discussion to narrow, technical themes and cut off inexperienced, "unpolished" speakers (Perreault 2015, 443). Further, when disputes emerge out of these limited processes, the complaints of the communities are juridified, "convert[ing] at least part of the movement's political energy into legal discussions that favor procedure and [transferring] part of the responsibility for initiating and controlling these claims to external legal advisors" (Rodríguez-Garavito 2011, 274).

These criticisms of the implementation of consultation processes resonate with the experiences of the Rama-Kriol communities in the case of the canal. However, bringing the structure of settler colonialism to the foreground makes clear that the settler state's duty to consult is an inherently contradictory idea. The notion that consultation by Latin American states could contribute to Afro-Indigenous self-determination by placing limits on state sovereignty explicitly accepts the idea that the state holds underlying sovereignty across its internationally-recognized territory (Anaya and Puig 2017). To require the state to consult with Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples is to make marginal changes in power relations between states and Afro-Indigenous communities without challenging state sovereignty itself. As Shannon Speed has argued, this sort of understanding "accept[s] the basic premise that the settler has settled, and is now *from here*, rather than acknowledging that there is a state of ongoing occupation, in Latin America as elsewhere in the hemisphere" (Speed 2017, 786). Recognizing that state of occupation undermines the logical basis for settler state sovereignty—upon which the duty to consult rests. Further, Christopher Loperena notes that Latin American "national progress is crucially bound up with white socio-spatial epistemologies, which relegate Indigenous peoples to a mythical past" and, within the broader racial project of mestizaje, "negate indigenous and black territorial claims" through the racialization of Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples as pre-mestizo (Loperena 2017, 802). The settler state thus constructs Indigenous and Afrodescendant territories as frontiers where dispossession by settlers and development projects would mean the civilizing and whitening of those spaces and the progress of the mestizo nation. Within this framework, it becomes clear that Latin American states are not poorly executing consultation processes. Rather, consultation processes take dispossession and elimination as their starting point, always reinforcing settler sovereignty by treating Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples

as but one of many ostensibly equal constituencies to incorporate into settler-directed decision-making processes. Settler colonialism can only be further entrenched in such processes.

Working with this understanding of the duty to consult, my account of the consultation process for the proposed canal also demonstrates that participatory models of liberal democratic engagement serve to encourage citizens, and particularly Afro-Indigenous peoples, to invest in settler capitalism. This has been well demonstrated in ethnographic research elsewhere in the Americas. In her ethnography of health care activism in the paradigmatic neoliberal case of Chile, Julia Paley finds that participation plays a paradoxical role insofar as it frames the neoliberal retreat of the welfare state as a component of a more democratic society in the aftermath of the Pinochet military dictatorship (Paley 2001, 6, 180–81). State officials insist on the participation of civil society both in shaping government policies and, critically, in providing services. This demand for participation serves as a mode of governmentality that forms subjects who manage themselves in line with the state's model of governance (Paley 2001, 3, 6; Foucault 1991). This articulates with the extensive anthropological literature on the subject-forming projects of neoliberal states and, following Speed's (2017) call for research across the Americas on settler capitalism, can contribute to an understanding of how settler colonialism has operated through neoliberalism. In Saskatchewan, Jaskiran Dhillon identifies participation as a modality through which state officials erase Indigenous political difference and disavow settler colonialism in both its historical and structural forms (Dhillon 2017, 134–48). In this model of participation, the state authorizes particular institutions as representative of Indigenous communities and invites them to engage in dialogue on the needs of the communities, thus ignoring the material, rather than purely discursive, forms of settler-colonial state power (Dhillon 2017, 147–48; see also Coulthard 2014, 46–47). These dimensions of participation manifested

themselves in the consultation on the interoceanic canal as state officials simultaneously insisted on the liberal intent of the mechanism, authorized particular institutions and individuals as 'representative' for the purposes of the consultation, and employed state power to demand that the Rama-Kriol communities comply with settler capitalism. The state officials sought to convert the Rama-Kriol communities into compliant, self-managing subjects and contributors to settler national development.

More than a decade after the approval of the Autonomy Statute and entrance into force of Convention 169, the GTR-K came into existence amid resistance to recent canal proposals in Nicaragua. Building on the histories of coexistence and shared freedom projects, the Rama and Kriol communities began to collaborate in more formal ways during resistance to neoliberal governments' proposals for wet and dry canals in the 1990s and early 2000s (Goett 2006, 72; 2016).[1] Allen Clair Duncan, a longtime member and former president of the Monkey Point Communal Government, recalls that the communities "form[ed] a commission, and then out [of] the commission you form a directive board, and the directive board used to be just the members them who was participating whatsoever in defend towards the community."[2] The directive board formed at that time included formal positions that continue to exist in the Monkey Point Communal Government today.

This became further institutionalized with the passage of Nicaragua's communal property law (Law 445) in 2003. Although "we never used to call weself communal government," Allen notes, "when the Law 445 start to mention, then we start organizing like a communal government." In 2004, several of these communities created the GTR-K, which could pool resources and jointly apply for the demarcation and titling of their communal lands. The six Rama communities and three Kriol communities that eventually formed the territory received

their title in 2009. The territory's governing bodies include a legislative Territorial Assembly—consisting of the communal government members of each of the nine communities—and a Territorial Government made up of two members from each communal government elected by the Territorial Assembly to handle day-to-day governance. Funds for these operations come primarily from the central government's Ministry of Finance and Public Credit, but they have also been supplemented with revenues from projects within the territory and assistance from local and international NGOs. Danish NGO IBIS, for example, provided funding for the creation of the territorial headquarters in Bluefields and for the hiring of four GTR-K staff. As has been widely commented in literature on neoliberalism, the insertions of NGOs into the management of relationships between Indigenous and Afrodescendant communities, the state, and capitalist intensification is reflective of the broader neoliberal shift toward governance-by-NGO and the privatization of the recognition of multicultural rights (Speed 2008b, 140; see also Bernal and Grewal 2014; Richard 2016).

Since the territory's formation, GTR-K authorities have worked with NGOs, private investors, the mestizo colonists in their territory, and state agencies on a variety of projects designed to generate revenues and entrench the GTR-K as the sole institutional mediator between the communities and non-community members.[3] During the time that I worked in the GTR-K headquarters (2014–2015), territorial authorities met repeatedly with members of the Nicaraguan Army regarding the illegal mestizo colonization of the communal lands, set the rates for colonists already in the territory to lease their land (Gobierno Territorial Rama y Kriol 2015a), attempted to negotiate the terms for private investors to create a coconut plantation, and worked with a variety of NGOs on issues ranging from renewable energy generation to tapir conservation and a community-based forest ranger program (see Chapter 5). Land management

and forest conservation issues are particularly urgent in the territory as mestizo colonists—who now substantially outnumber Rama and Kriol community members within the territory—illegally clear growing swathes of communal lands for cattle ranching and slash-and-burn agriculture (Jordan et al. 2016).

In one sense, the recognition of communal lands and formation of representative institutions within those lands has meant embedding certain ideological assumptions on land tenure and governance imposed by international donors and state agents. The process of demarcation and titling itself fixes communities in these lands and locks in previously flexible and continuously renegotiated inter- and intra-communal relations relative to lands (Finley-Brook 2016; see also Bryan 2011). As international financial institutions became involved, the land claims process became increasingly standardized and aimed at making communal lands intelligible for the purposes of governance and capitalist insertion (Hale 2011). At the same time that the process has carried these costs, it has also failed to bring meaningful land tenure security in the face of the continuing influx of settlers and cattle ranchers across the Caribbean coast (Finley-Brook 2016). Meanwhile, the legal framework under which Indigenous and Afrodescendant governments were formed is embedded in the neoliberal politics of diffusing responsibilities and the neo-extractivist politics of opening communal lands to resource extraction and infrastructure projects (Baracco 2017, 10–13; see also Gudynas 2009; Sawyer and Gomez 2012). Along these lines, Juliet Erazo has noted that such territorial governments may create "new dynamics of rule and discipline" as they demand that community members become "more active and informed citizens" (Erazo 2013, 2, 193).

At the same time, community members have found creative ways to develop new possibilities for autonomy within and beyond their relationships of interdependency with outside

actors. Community members have taken collective actions to address threats to their livelihoods and develop both short and long-term economic and political projects, and these actions have created a sense of solidarity and autonomy far beyond what a settler state is capable of granting. This parallels the sense of sovereignty that Erazo employs in her research with Indigenous organizations in Ecuador, where "many of the organizations typically understood as indigenous *rights* organizations, working to increase levels of autonomy in relation to the state, are simultaneously indigenous *governing* organizations" (Erazo 2013, 5). Those organizations work "to increase local control over the ways that education and other forms of development are practiced within" their territories (Erazo 2013, 2). As Cattelino (2008) and Goett (2017) argue, the construction of territorial autonomy emerges from, and is complemented by, acts of autonomy in daily and intimate life that enable visions of broader—and even utopian—political and economic projects. The politics of communal and territorial governance on Nicaragua's Caribbean coast contain these contradictory risks and possibilities for autonomy.

To briefly foreshadow my conclusions, I argue in the rest of this chapter that the faulty consultation process in fact undermined the *practice* of autonomy in the Rama-Kriol Territory. With encouragement from NGOs and international experts, Rama-Kriol community leaders chose to engage with the state through the consultation process rather than directly resist the canal from the start. This created space for settler state officials to foment divisions prior and during their flawed consultation process, generating competing claims of legitimacy and authority when these officials claimed to have obtained a free, prior, and informed consent agreement from the GTR-K. Rather than operating within the existing field of Rama-Kriol struggle against settler colonization, the consultation process played a mediating role that led to the internationalization and decontextualization of the struggle, ultimately weakening the ability

of the communities to resist settler capitalist insertion into their territory. Practices of autonomy in the territory have historically depended upon intra- and inter-communal solidarity, and the consultation process allowed the state to enter and disrupt communal politics, dismantling internal networks of support that are crucial for the maintenance and further entrenchment of autonomy. Instead of giving the communities a tool for negotiating their encounter with the state, the consultation process facilitated settler state's broader divide-and-conquer strategy.

Negotiating a Framework for Consultation

In mid-2012, President Ortega announced that his government would revive the longstanding dream of building an interoceanic shipping canal through Nicaragua. As with oil and gas under the self-identifying left-wing governments in Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador earlier this century, the FSLN government in Nicaragua viewed the canal project as an opportunity to generate economic independence from the U.S. (e.g., Prensa Latina 2015). Although the canal proposal had similarities with proposals put forward by Ortega's three most recent predecessors (van der Post 2014), this proposal was the first in which the government recognized in law its duty to consult with the affected Indigenous and Afrodescendant communities of the Caribbean coast, pursuant to Law 445 and Convention 169. The initial legal framework for the canal—Law 800 (2012)—specified that "affected Indigenous Territories will be consulted ... in a free, prior, and informed way, in accordance with the Convention on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries [Convention 169]" (art. 28; author's translation).

Only one year later, though, the central government reversed course on the duty to consult and appeared to move forward with the canal without any formal opportunity for input

from the affected communities. The concession for the construction of the canal, granted to the Hong Kong Nicaragua Canal Development Investment Company (HKND), included no mention of a consultation process, and the National Assembly approved Law 840, formalizing the concession agreement, a week after its introduction in the National Assembly in June 2013 (Enríquez 2013).[4] The new law specified that the process for expropriating communal property would only entail notifying "the relevant Regional or Municipal Council, which shall have the right to express its respective opinion regarding the expropriation within seven (7) days after receiving the notification" (art. 12, para. [c]). The Regional Council—controlled by the Sandinistas and dominated by mestizos (González 2016)—would only have the right to provide its opinion, and "consent or approval" would not be required. Pushing aside any doubts about conflicts between this law and the existing laws requiring consultation, Law 840 continued, "No other Consent, action, or requirement established in other laws shall be required for the completion of this expropriation process."

The approval of Law 840 triggered a set of legal challenges at the national and international levels. The month after Law 840 was approved, the territory's longtime lawyer, María Luisa Acosta, filed a lawsuit with Nicaragua's Supreme Court of Justice on behalf of the GTR-K and three potentially affected communities challenging the law's constitutionality. Among other elements, the suit argued that Law 840 conflicts with the Autonomy Statute, which states that communal lands "are inalienable; they cannot be donated, sold, confiscated, or taxed" (art. 36);[5] that it violates the constitutional requirement (art. 181 of the Political Constitution of Nicaragua) that the Regional Council approve such a concession; and that it ignores the Nicaraguan state's obligations under Convention 169 and the American Convention on Human Rights, among other international legal instruments. Five months later, the Supreme Court of

Justice dismissed the case, writing that the communities did not have standing since the exact route of the canal had not been determined—a specious argument since all of HKND's route proposals would have affected some subset of the petitioning communities. Having exhausted domestic legal options, the communities proceeded to petition the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) on the matter.

When the route of the canal was announced in July 2014, it became clear that the Rama-Kriol Territory would be heavily affected, including the complete displacement of one Rama community. Unlike the dry canal proposed in 1994, which would have had its terminus at Monkey Point, this project proposed to make use of the Punta Gorda River and build a deep-water port at the site of the Rama community of Bangkukuk Taik. As the only community with a substantial number of Rama language speakers—approximately twenty, half of whom are fluent (Gobierno Territorial Rama y Kriol 2007, 82)—Bangkukuk has particular value in the imaginary of cultural preservationists, drawing substantial media attention in the aftermath of the route announcement. While Bangkukuk is the only community that would be entirely displaced, Monkey Point would also be particularly affected as the next closest community to the proposed port. Further, the commission announced that construction would begin by the end of the year. In the aftermath of these developments, the IACHR announced it was studying the case in November 2014, and the communities filed a request for precautionary measures from the IACHR in December.[6]

When I began ethnographic research with the GTR-K shortly after the route was announced, territorial leaders and their NGO allies were mobilizing efforts to pressure the central and regional governments to reverse course and conduct a consultation prior to the start of construction. As an immediate response to the route announcement, the GTR-K sent a letter to

the central government and HKND to "formally request information on the status of the Grand Canal, and ... establish communication with the intention of maintaining dialogue before consultation proceedings with free, prior, and informed consent are carried out." GTR-K leaders reiterated this request in a meeting with central government representatives shortly thereafter. In July 2014, after rumors circulated in the communities that the GTR-K had agreed to the canal project, the GTR-K issued a statement maintaining its position that the state must amend Law 840 and conduct a consultation process. A delegation from the GTR-K addressed a September 2014 national anti-canal forum in Managua, presenting on the project's violations of Indigenous and Afrodescendant rights.

Meanwhile, the GTR-K developed a plan to pressure the central government to disregard Law 840's provisions on consultation. They began by drafting a document laying out the communities' guidelines for a future consultation process. GTR-K members spoke of the proposed document as "a tool for negotiation" with the state, allowing them to have a concrete discussion about elements of the consultation with government representatives. Accompanied by an international expert on the duty to consult, a photographer, and me, GTR-K leaders traveled to the nine communities at the beginning of December 2014. With a generator and projector in tow, the expert gave a presentation on Convention 169 and the duty to consult, including a video with demonstrations of proper and improper forms of consultation. Each community then broke into groups and answered a series of questions about their desired form of consultation—how long it would last, what the steps would be, in what language it would be carried out, what studies they wanted to have conducted, what kinds of technical assistance and independent observation would be necessary. On our return to Bluefields, guidelines for a consultation process based on these conversations were drafted, amended, and approved by the full territorial assembly.

The GTR-K's decision to pursue litigation to force the state to consult them fits with the territorial government's stated aim of building autonomy through strategic engagement with the capitalist projects. As written in the territory's 2009 economic program, the GTR-K's goals are: "Recovering, diversifying, and increasing traditional production in order to achieve, at the very minimum, a healthy subsistence economy in each community, and reorienting the market economy with collective aims to achieve individual and communal benefits, as well as territorial benefits, so that economic initiatives serve to strengthen the recovery of control over the territory" (Gobierno Territorial Rama y Kriol 2009, 136). In line with this policy statement, GTR-K members saw consultation as a tool for managing their engagement with capital and ensuring their self-determination in that process. This was clear in the consultation guidelines approved by the territorial assembly, which insist that the consultation should clarify the territory's "participation in the benefits" of the canal. That is, the territorial authorities wished to use consultation to assert and reinforce their autonomy by making their consent contingent upon the economic benefits to the territory. GTR-K President Héctor Thomas repeated this goal in an interview with me later in 2015, musing that with the canal, "If we as government have a good money, maybe we could go to these people them (mestizo settlers) and give them some offer and say that we'll buy your land, just with the objective to take them out [of the territory]." He rooted this proposal in his observations from a U.S. State Department-sponsored trip to Oklahoma, where he met with tribal authorities and learned about their nations' efforts to acquire trust lands. The GTR-K's stance in 2014–15 was consistent with the dominant viewpoints in Monkey Point at the time of the dry canal proposal, when Goett similarly found "that their resistance to the project had little to do with the hazards of neoliberal globalization or environmental degradation,

but was based in a desire to play a decisive role in controlling the terms and conditions of capitalist insertion in their region to their own benefit" (2006, 72).

Although support for the consultation process prevailed in the GTR-K headquarters, some community members saw the emphasis on consultation as a distraction from the canal project itself. This view was particularly prevalent in Bangkukuk Taik, where, during the GTR-K's December 2014 visit to draw up consultation guidelines, a vocal group of community members initially rejected the consultation mechanism and demanded that the project be rejected outright. After listening to the consultation expert's presentation, a member of this group responded to the list of discussion questions by telling the visitors, "We no want the canal, and we no want no consultation neither." For them, the consultation could only muddle what was already eminently clear: The government had no right to build the canal in their territory unless the community members consented to it. This aligns with César Rodríguez-Garavito's (2011) analysis that the duty to consult juridifies communities' struggles and shifts communities' energies to a procedural debate rather than direct contestation of the proposed project. Making matters more difficult for consultation proponents, several of these community members also stated their belief that the GTR-K had already secretly approved the canal concession, leading them to reject the GTR-K's presence in the community. The president of the community did eventually decide to endorse the GTR-K's request for a consultation process, but he remained absolutely opposed to the canal project and the displacement of Bangkukuk Taik. Allen, the communal government president in nearby Monkey Point, admired their firm stance, telling me, "The people them what really, really feel like them and the earth is one, them is the one what no want leave it."

Consulting on the Canal: "We Cannot Have Excessive Democracy"

Shortly after the GTR-K approved guidelines for a consultation process on the canal, Sandinista officials suddenly expressed interest in carrying out a consultation process at the beginning of 2015.[7] Johnny Hodgson, a longtime Sandinista activist who then served as President Ortega's representative in the RACCS, contacted the territorial leadership in early January to make arrangements. In a crush of daily meetings, Hodgson, Michael Campbell from the government's development promotion agency on the Caribbean coast (ProNicaribe), and two other officials drafted a "harmonized proposal" for the consultation based on the GTR-K's guidelines—but with key exceptions. International advisors would only be provided after an agreement was reached, and the timeline for the consultation process was a matter of days rather than months. In response, the GTR-K sent a letter to Hodgson demanding that the original guidelines be respected.

Why, after nineteen months of ignoring the duty to consult, did government officials reverse course? In the first place, the June 2015 environmental and social impact assessment commissioned by HKND and carried out by British sustainability consultancy Environmental Resource Management (ERM), concluded that HKND should "actively support and ensure that consultation [sic] with the Nahoa and GTR-K are in accordance with Nicaraguan law, ILO 169, and international standards, and Free Prior and Informed Consent should be secured before any canal construction begins" (Environmental Resource Management 2015, 107). HKND and the Nicaraguan government were likely aware that ERM planned on including language to this effect before Hodgson contacted the GTR-K. Circumstantial evidence indicates that central government officials were concerned that the lack of consultation and the petition at the IACHR could be a liability with investors concerned about corporate social responsibility. Only one

month after Hodgson contacted the GTR-K about the consultation, Paul Oquist, a Nicaraguan government minister serving as executive director of the Grand Canal Commission, touched down in Belgium, where he solicited investment in the canal project with a slideshow presentation touting that the port at the Caribbean terminus "will be on dredge filled reclaimed land with minimal impact on the Indigenous People" (Oquist 2015, 25). Oquist clearly saw a need to allay potential investors' concerns about violations of Indigenous rights. Later in the year, Oquist also announced at a forum in Washington, DC, that he and President Ortega had decided to follow all recommendations from ERM (Kraul 2015).

In meetings I attended and documents I reviewed in Bluefields, central and regional government representatives spoke of consultation as a burden to be quickly overcome through limitations on its scope. This is typical of such consultation processes in Latin America (e.g., Perreault 2015, 446–48). They assumed that the process would ultimately yield consent for the canal and repeatedly refused to accept the GTR-K's terms for the consultation. This is clear in minutes I was given from the January 2015 consultation planning meetings, in which Hodgson claimed that an international observer "could obstruct or slow down the consultation." With repeated pleas for the territorial leaders to "be practical," he accused them of saying, "We will [give consent], but not right now." That is, he wanted them to give consent prior to the consultation process. At a government-sponsored conference on regional autonomy that I attended, Michael Campbell, the ProNicaribe official, made a case for limiting consultation processes, arguing, "What we have to guarantee is that efficient processes of free, prior, and informed consultation are being organized when it has to do with private investment, or investment that comes from outside the Indigenous and Afrodescendant territories. The processes must be efficient. We cannot have excessive democracy that ends up scaring away investment."[8]

Across these statements, government officials demanded that the communities accept the state's authority to operate in a financial capitalist temporality—that is, quickly enough to avoid "scaring away investment." The underlying logic of this statement indicates that Campbell saw consultation as a necessity more because it was a box that needed to be ticked for foreign investors than because it was a legal requirement or political necessity within the RACCS. The statements also highlight government officials' fear that communities could use foot-dragging in consultation processes as a weapon to halt a project.

By February 2015, the central and regional government representatives had persuaded several GTR-K members to accept their earlier proposal as a preliminary stage of the consultation process. The group would visit each community for one or two days, during which time the canal commission's regional representatives would present the benefits of the project, ask about the kinds of development projects the communities wanted, and draw up minutes from the meetings. Each member of the territorial government earned a stipend of US$600 for joining the group—nearly double the average monthly salary in Nicaragua's formal economy at that time (Instituto Nacional de Información de Desarrollo 2016, 148). Community members received around seven dollars for their attendance. The stipend made principled resistance to a flawed process an impossible choice for several territorial government members who likely would not have otherwise participated. After returning from the trip, one communal government president asked me, eyes averted and laughing nervously, if his participation would affect the GTR-K's petition to the IACHR. Based on his understanding of the duty to consult prior to leaving for the community visits, the flaws in the consultation and expropriation process should have made his participation in the visits irrelevant. In other words, he believed that communal

resistance to the canal, as exercised in response to previous canal proposals, could be supplanted by international enforcement of the duty to consult.

Allen, by contrast, had no interest in placing trust in judicial processes alone. He recounted, "I tell them (the government representatives), unu no going to Monkey Point, and unu no going to Bangkukuk. See what happen if unu try and reach there." There was a precedent to this direct resistance. Allen pulled up a video on his computer in the office to show me what happened when the central government tried to bring a group of ambassadors and other officials to Monkey Point without the communal government's permission to discuss a proposed deep-water port several years prior. A set of confused heads bob in a small boat just offshore while community members shouted that they did not want the project. The video cuts to Allen patiently explaining to Virgilio Silva, the president of Nicaragua's port authority, that he must obtain permission to visit the community at the GTR-K offices in Bluefields before entering the territory. The delegation eventually returns to its boats and leaves. The port project was canceled just before the announcement of the most recent canal proposal, and community leaders saw this assertion of territorial autonomy as a factor that contributed to its failure.

This was but one episode in a recent history of direct resistance as a practice of autonomy in Monkey Point and the Rama-Kriol Territory. Direct action to protect communal lands is both integral to the practice of autonomy and foundational to the political-legal instruments of the formal autonomy regime. The autonomy regime itself is the negotiated settlement of the Caribbean front of the Contra war, in which many Rama and Kriol people participated (see Chapter 3; also Goett 2017, 126–27). Allen makes explicit the connection to that struggle, citing his older brother, John Henry "Johnny" Clair Duncan, who was killed by government forces in Bluefields in 1985 (see also Goett 2017, 117). On a visit home during the conflict, Allen recalled

to me that Johnny talked him out of joining the war effort, telling him, “This war is my war. You fight the next one.” Discussing his involvement in the communal and territorial governments, Allen says, “This is my war.”

The Monkey Point community in particular has shown its willingness to employ direct action when working through the political and legal systems fails to provide the desired result. As Goett (2017) recounts, in 2013, a minority of Monkey Point community members residing in Bluefields, dissatisfied with the incumbent communal government, found Sandinista regional government officials interested in assisting with a plan to carry out an early election. When the Sandinista officials arrived in Monkey Point, community members residing in Monkey Point met the officials’ boat at the wharf and sent them back to Bluefields (Goett 2017, 182–84). More dramatically, in 2000, a group of men in the community who identified as ‘bad boys’—“a countercultural identity that the men embraced and reproduced in their oppositional politics, expressive culture, and personal style”—destroyed a U.S. investor’s illegal agricultural operation within communal lands after expelling his employees (Goett 2017, 55–57). From these experiences, Monkey Point and GTR-K leaders had a script for successfully asserting their autonomy and territoriality against attempts by central and regional government officials to undermine the community’s titled lands.

This time around, though, Allen and other community leaders ultimately settled on a strategy reliant on international adjudication. Allowing the delegation to come ashore, a majority of communal government members across the territory listened to the officials’ presentation but refused to sign any documents acknowledging the visit as a formal consultation. After all the trips had been completed in early March, the officials had failed to collect the signatures of a majority of any of the territory’s nine communal governments. Meanwhile, those in the GTR-K

who opposed the delegation to the communities were determined to preempt any claims from the central government that the consultation had been conducted with the institutional endorsement of the territorial government. Allen and I remained in Bluefields during the visits and compiled several hundred pages of documents as evidence of the government's failure to properly consult the communities, which we then distributed to the GTR-K's contacts in international organizations.

Around the same time, Becky McCray, the first Rama woman to become a lawyer, agreed to join a group of anti-canal leaders from across Nicaragua in a March 2015 hearing before the IACHR in Washington, DC. Carefully presenting herself as a member of the Rama people rather than a legal representative of the GTR-K, Becky told the commission:

> The Rama-Kriol people approved a Guideline Document for Conducting a Consultation Process regarding this project on December 18, 2014. That document, which was officially submitted to the Government of Nicaragua in January 2015, includes the participation of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights with the aim of guaranteeing an impartial observer. Despite this, the response of the State has been to visit the communities, and, through the payment of cash and stipends to certain indigenous people, held meetings in an attempt to pass this off as a consultation that does not comply with the minimum standards on this matter (*Nicaragua: canal transoceánico* 2015; author's translation).

This presentation appeared to be successful as the IACHR subsequently requested further information from the petitioning communities. Despite that request and further submissions from the communities' lawyer, it was not until 2018—in the midst of an IACHR investigation in a national crisis that left hundreds dead at the hands of the police and government aligned paramilitaries—that the IACHR responded to the communities' petition by opening a case, apparently because of new policies "that make it possible to reduce procedural backlog in the petition and case system" (Inter-American Commission on Human Rights 2016).

Although conversations on the canal continued within the GTR-K, interactions between territorial leaders and Sandinista officials paused over the following months. The canal project seemed dormant when I concluded my first research stint in Bluefields in July 2015, and a general reconciliation took place between GTR-K members divided over the consultation process. After canal authorities made several statements to local and international media indicating that they had received the consent of the GTR-K, President Héctor Thomas and another GTR-K member—both of whom had gone on the delegation to the communities—distributed a press release announcing that the GTR-K "considers the consultation process developed in its communities to be inconclusive" and reiterating that during the visits, "all of the communities declared: that *more information about this project* is needed, the urgent necessity [of] an *international observer* proposed by the Indigenous Rama-Kriol people, and avoiding placing *time pressure* on the communities" (Gobierno Territorial Rama y Kriol 2015b; emphasis in original). Around the same time, reports emerged that Wang Jing, the billionaire owner of HKND, had lost nearly 90 percent of his wealth in the Chinese stock market over the preceding year, leading to further speculation about the seriousness of the canal project (Phillips 2015). It seemed that those GTR-K members who had participated in the consultation trip had earned their stipend at no cost to the communities. I visited the territorial headquarters again in December 2015, and the GTR-K was unanimously focused on the constant, underlying issue of stopping the colonization of their territory by mestizo settlers rather than the canal—a slower growing but more existential threat to autonomy than the canal.

The situation changed dramatically when Hodgson contacted the GTR-K in the final days of 2015 to organize an urgent territorial assembly with the aim of approving an agreement on the canal. Voting in favor would mean giving consent for the GTR-K to negotiate a final 'free, prior,

and informed consent agreement' and then a perpetual lease for the land—some 263 square kilometers—to be used for the canal (González 2019). Divisions fell along similar lines as in the case of the delegation to the communities: Héctor Thomas and his allies led the effort to obtain approval for an agreement, and Allen, Becky McCray, and former GTR-K president Santiago Thomas became the public faces of the group opposed to any agreement without proper consultation (Kilpatrick 2016; León C. and Romero 2016). This time, though, canal supporters escalated financial pressure on community leaders. For years, Allen had been receiving a salary as a technical advisor to the GTR-K, effectively meaning that he was paid so that he could permanently attend to daily matters in the GTR-K headquarters. Just as Hodgson was coordinating the territorial assembly, Allen received word from within the GTR-K that his salary would be cut off—not just effective immediately, but retroactive to the previous month. Without that salary, he would have to maintain himself by renting out his small boat and fishing in Monkey Point for much of the year—without internet or phone service—instead of working in the office. At the same time, several of Allen's family members who served in the Monkey Point Communal Government showed up in Bluefields to support signing the canal agreement. This came after the same family members had vocally opposed the consultation process a year earlier. Allen claimed that these family members had been bribed by the central government with several hundred dollars, an allegation that was supported by a relative's complaints that another family member had taken his share. The assembly voted narrowly to authorize negotiations in mid-January. Allen, Santiago, and several other opponents of the agreement put together a statement accusing the central government of using "illegal and oppressive practices" and announcing a lawsuit against the officials involved (Miembros del GTR-K 2016).

In the aftermath of this assembly, the GTR-K had in most ways split apart. When the central government needed to communicate with the GTR-K, it summoned only those who supported them, including Allen's family members who were never members of the territorial government in the first place. Meanwhile, Allen, Santiago, and other opponents of the consultation process increasingly coordinated their actions on the canal. They had a seeming victory when, in April, a meeting of the GTR-K resolved to "neither accept nor sign any agreement with the grand canal commission without having first held an internal meeting of the GTR-K" (Gobierno Territorial Rama y Kriol 2016). This measure was supposed to ensure that territorial authorities would have an opportunity to review any such agreement on their own terms, even though opponents of the consultation process still fundamentally rejected the assumptions allowing for such an agreement to be drafted.

Instead, only two weeks later, the canal commission flew five territorial government members and several other communal government members to Managua for a ceremony in which Héctor Thomas signed a "Free, Prior, and Informed Consent Agreement" with the president of the Grand Canal Authority. Government-allied media promptly published images of the ceremony and touted the agreement as the final result of "two-and-a-half years of consultation with the communities" (Prado Reyes 2016). One week later, Héctor joined Johnny Hodgson in New York at the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (PFII), where the two of them presented the agreement publicly and in a private meeting with Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples Victoria Tauli-Corpuz (*La Voz del Sandinismo* 2016).

In response, attorney María Luisa Acosta, Allen, the presidents of the Bangkukuk Taik and Wiring Cay Communal Governments, and several other community leaders gave a press

conference in Managua denying that they had been consulted and rejecting the agreement signed by Héctor (Vílchez 2016). These opponents of the consent agreement and their allies quickly organized a tour of the nine communities of the GTR-K in which they presented information on the canal project, the duty to consult, and the agreement that Héctor had signed (Álvarez M. 2016). Contesting the central government's performance of compliance with the duty to consult at the PFII, opponents of the agreement recorded the meetings they held in each community and produced a video in both Spanish and English to persuade an international audience that the communities neither had been consulted nor had given their consent to the canal project (*We Do Not Consent! The Indigenous Struggle against the Grand Canal of Nicaragua* 2016).

Rebuilding in the Aftermath of the Consultation Process

Although the debate over the canal has continued at the national level in Nicaragua ("Businessman behind Nicaragua Canal says project with Ortega is still on" 2021), GTR-K debate over the substance of the canal project largely ended in mid-2016, though debates over the resulting international litigation have continued. Since 2016, the GTR-K has had to attempt to overcome the divisions sown by public officials during the consultation and consent process and return to the daily activities of territorial governance. Turning to this shift in territorial politics in what remains of this chapter, I assess how the central government's pursuit of a sham consultation and consent agreement for the canal has affected the Rama-Kriol communities' ability to practice autonomy.

Since the contested consultation process, the ability of the GTR-K to practice autonomy has been eroded primarily in two ways. First, divisions sown in the GTR-K and its constituent communities through the intervention of central and regional government officials have led to a

decrease in funding for critical territorial activities and have hampered collaborative work at a variety of levels. By 2019, two NGOs that previously provided funding for crucial GTR-K projects had declined to renew their agreements with the territory. According to several GTR-K members, an organization that provided funding for administrative staff in the territorial headquarters declined to renew its project due to reluctance to involve the organization in such a contentious atmosphere, especially after an employee of the organization had been accused of being overly involved in pro-consultation efforts by Sandinista-affiliated territorial leaders. The same territorial leaders tell me that another organization involved in communal land preservation ceased work at the territorial level to avoid political pressures related to the canal. In other words, the privatization of multicultural recognition carried out by previous neoliberal regimes in Nicaragua—which led to the surge in NGOs working with Indigenous and Afrodescendant communities—has allowed state officials and territorial allies to simply push out the supposed guarantors of multicultural rights through intimidation and non-cooperation, thus asserting the unmitigated sovereignty of the state (see Speed 2008b, 139–41).

Divisions in the territorial government have also led to changes in the day-to-day governance of the territory. Lack of confidence in senior GTR-K leaders led the territorial assembly to assign a commission of GTR-K members from each community to supervise and participate in the executive activities of the territorial government. This action is intended to prevent rogue territorial leaders from acting alone when territorial assembly members are in their communities and out of contact with the GTR-K headquarters. Meanwhile, territorial leaders told me the GTR-K entered a holding period while awaiting territorial elections that were planned for late 2018. That stance, together with the lack of administrative staff, has slowed critical activities like collecting rent from mestizo settlers without titles to lands they occupy in the territory.

Second, the energy expended on pressuring the government to comply with the duty to consult has come at the cost of alternative, historically-rooted methods of asserting autonomy in the territory that might have been more successful. The clearest example of such an alternative is communal activism rooted in the right to communal lands. The GTR-K had two key legal provisions that should have prevented the canal project regardless of the consultation process. First, Article 17 of Law 445 absolutely prohibits the displacement of Indigenous and Afrodescendant communities, which should rule out any route—including the most recent iteration—that would displace Bangkukuk Taik. Second, as the communities' petition to the IACHR notes, the use of the legal fiction of an "indefinite lease" for communal lands in the canal zone, as mentioned in the "Free, Prior, and Informed Consent Agreement," effectively violates the inalienability of communal lands as guaranteed in Laws 28 and 445 (González 2019).

Still more important than these legal protections, the Rama-Kriol communities have a history of resistance to incursions into their communal lands. As already mentioned, the intercommunal collaborations that formed the basis for the creation of the GTR-K in Bangkukuk Taik, Wiring Cay, and Monkey Point centered on resistance to previous interoceanic canal proposals. Also immediately relevant are the Monkey Point community's acts of resistance to the illegal land grab in 2000 and to central government officials' unauthorized visits to the community in the past decade. These experiences could have been the grounding for a land-based resistance to the most recent canal proposal.

After the central government's decision to perform compliance with the duty to consult, the GTR-K's legal strategy of demanding a consultation process—as encouraged by international experts and NGO contacts—opened the communities to divisive interventions that made any future organizing around communal lands more difficult. In the absence of timely action from

the Inter-American Human Rights System to adjudicate violations of the duty to consult, those central government officials have been able to sow doubts and claim that a full consultation process led to the supposed "Free, Prior, and Informed Consent Agreement" signed by the president of the GTR-K. In the end, it was a lack of investment that prevented the start of construction within communal lands; the question of consultation, in the eyes of the central government, was resolved.

Conclusion

In the long history of Nicaraguan interoceanic canal proposals, the most recent iteration was the first case in which the duty to consult was formally enshrined in Nicaraguan law, recognized in Inter-American jurisprudence, and entrenched in international corporate social responsibility norms. The search for investors in the canal project left the central government feeling pressured to both demonstrate compliance with the duty to consult and prevent "excessive democracy" in the consultation process, ultimately leading the central government to pursue a sham consultation process that failed to comply with the most basic international standards. I have argued in this chapter that the central government's embrace of the duty to consult, which assumes underlying settler sovereignty, eroded existing practices of autonomy in the Rama-Kriol Territory and weakened the Rama-Kriol communities' ability to negotiate or reject the use of their territory for the canal project. I have detailed a scenario in which reliance on international judicial bodies to enforce the duty to consult in fact undermines local practices of autonomy. This joins the growing literature from Latin America that challenges the effectiveness of the duty to consult as a mode of guaranteeing Indigenous and Afrodescendant self-determination. The duty to consult relies on the settler state acting contrary to the constant

dispossession of Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples that is characteristic of—and essential to—the capitalist mode of production. Alternatively, it requires international enforcement by institutions that are themselves dominated by settler states, as I argued in Chapter 2. Farcical consultation processes have continued to play out in Nicaragua, as with the consultation process for the Green Climate Fund's financing in Nicaragua described in Chapter 2. The Rama-Kriol Territory was fortunate to face a canal project that appears unlikely to ever be built, but even in that situation, the consultation process has significantly damaged territorial autonomy. In the aftermath, divisions have continued, but there have also been efforts to return to community-based, sovereignty-oriented practices, to which I turn my attention in the next chapter.

Notes

[1] The term "wet canal" refers to the traditional shipping canal: an artificial channel through which ships may pass. By contrast, a "dry canal" effectively connects two bodies of water through the construction of deep-water ports and a railroad for the transportation of cargo and/or passengers. For the history of canal proposals in Nicaragua, see (van der Post 2014).

[2] "Directive board" in Creole ("junta directiva" in Spanish) refers to an executive committee.

[3] Although Law 445 guarantees communal governments 25 percent of state revenues from the exploitation of natural resources in the autonomous regions (art. 34), that funding level has never been met, making finding outside revenues a practical necessity for the operation of territorial governments.

[4] State institutions in Nicaragua—especially the Supreme Electoral Council (CSE), Supreme Court of Justice (CSJ), and National Assembly—are tightly controlled by the ruling FSLN through both legal and extralegal means ("Los correos electrónicos que confirman el control político del FSLN sobre los empleados públicos" 2022; Martí i Puig 2016; Regidor 2022). Further, Ortega's authority within the FSLN is maintained through swift retribution for disobedience, including, for example, the removal of the one FSLN National Assembly member who voted against Law 840 (Enríquez 2013).

[5] Nicaragua's constitution establishes that the Autonomy Statute has the rank of a constitutional law in the communities of the Caribbean coast (art. 5).

[6] While IACHR decisions are not binding, if the state does not comply, the IACHR may forward the case to the binding arbitration of the Inter-American Court. Petitions are the regular mechanism in the IACHR, and a request for precautionary measures is the emergency procedure to prevent imminent state actions.

[7] Although government officials termed this a "prior consultation," the communities' representatives have noted that the consultation could not be "prior" if the concession was already granted in 2013 and construction officially began on December 22, 2014. Despite a ribbon-cutting ceremony on that date, no major construction has taken place ("Businessman behind Nicaragua Canal says project with Ortega is still on" 2021), and concessionaire HKND has vacated its office and allowed its website domain to expire.

[8] Public comment at the Conferencia Preparatoria del V Simposio de Autonomía de la Costa Caribe, Bluefields, May 27, 2015

Chapter 5: "We Have to Look Solution Weself": Vigilance and Jurisdiction in the Rama-Kriol Territory

Introduction

In August 2019, a group of some 25 people took three boats up the Indian River in the Rama-Kriol Territory. This area of the territory overlaps with 80 percent of the Indio-Maíz Biological Reserve. Together with the Bosawás Biosphere Reserve to the north, Indio-Maíz forms the largest tropical rainforest in the Americas outside of the Amazon. In addition to myself, the group consisted of four communal forest rangers, members of the Indian River Communal Government, and several Indian River community members whose lands were recently taken by settlers. The communal government members responded to this dispossession by obtaining funding from an international conservation NGO for gas, food, and the forest rangers' pay. Two forest rangers came from Indian River, and the other two came from the Kriol community of Greytown.

With 15 horsepower engines on long, narrow boats, we made our way further into the territory and Indio-Maíz. We were accompanied by the territorial calls of howler monkeys, known as baboons in Creole. The left bank of the Indian River is a narrow strip of land separating the river from the Caribbean. Coconut palms predominate here. They are the remnants of the coconut plantations discussed in Chapter 3, where Kriol, Rama, and Miskitu workers under slavery-like conditions. The right bank of the river changed from tightly-spaced houses to small cattle ranches punctuated with coconut palms, to dense bursts of fresh, green growth amid the charred remains of Raphia palms. The palms were decimated first by Hurricane Otto in 2016 (Jordan 2016). Then, in 2018, a settler burning a rice field amid the fallen brush accidentally started a forest fire, sparking nationwide protests against government inaction (Mayer 2018). The

river veers northwest from here, and charred trees give way to a broadleaf forest. Towering iibu trees, with their bright pink flowers, line the banks of the river. They attract scarlet and great green macaws to the canopy. Peccaries and Baird's tapirs eat their fallen fruits. These trees and fruits play a key role in Rama and Kriol ethnobotany. The hard wood is used in home construction. A mealie powder from the seeds, which they ferment and mix with water and sugar to create a drink known as iibu bunya.

The forest seemed to be recovering well, but signs of colonization were everywhere to the trained eye. Two Rama forest rangers, Sam and De, pointed out new trails cut into the foliage, which settlers use to demarcate lands they intend to claim and usually sell. Clusters of wooden Rama houses stand on stilts every few miles, but between them, settlers had built new houses with plastic tarps or corrugated metal sheets for roofs. The houses were often near charred plots of land. On several occasions, we spotted iibu trees that settlers had cut down and were burning for charcoal. This sight elicited tsks and complaints about the wasteful destruction of these trees.

As we navigated the river, we engaged in the usual activities of the communal forest rangers: we identified sites occupied by settlers, took GPS coordinates, jotted down their activities in notebooks, and interviewed settlers about their reasons for entering the territory. Communal government leaders told the settlers that their presence was illegal under Nicaraguan law. They must leave. Some settlers nodded silently; one simply asked, "When?" Nobody answered him.

After six days on the river, we returned to San Juan. The community's database manager, a young Rama man, entered the newly collected data and prepared a report. A Rama lawyer used that report as evidence for several complaints about individual settlers, which the community

leaders filed with state institutions, including the local judge, the municipal government, the Nicaraguan National Police, and the Nicaraguan Navy. Naval forces subsequently removed one settler from the territory, but the rest remained in the territory.

Territorial patrols are a dominant strategy in the three Rama and Kriol communities that overlap with the Indio-Maíz Biological Reserve. In my participant-observation and interviews, few community members have questioned the value of patrolling their territory. These patrols produce terabytes of data and mountains of paper reports. Yet they rarely accomplish their stated aim of removing settlers from the Rama and Kriol peoples' territory. In this chapter, I will focus on the following two questions: First, why has vigilance been so central to Rama-Kriol strategies for resisting land grabs and colonization? Second, what can Rama-Kriol vigilance tell us about Afro-Indigenous resistance to racialized dispossession?

To answer these questions, this chapter analyzes the political horizons of Rama-Kriol vigilance. Specifically, I find that vigilance serves simultaneously as a tactic that pursues state recognition and as a tactic that pursues authority beyond settler state sovereignty. I am terming this a *bivalent tactic*; that is, an individual form of political action that can advance two political horizons simultaneously. In this case, Rama and Kriol people use the bivalent tactic of vigilance to pursue the limited protections of state recognition while simultaneously building their own authority, jurisdiction, and, ultimately, sovereignty. States often offer recognition to social movements as a form of containment and as a way of dividing and domesticating social movements. Through bivalent tactics, Rama and Kriol people are turning this containment on its head; they are using state recognition to pursue another horizon altogether.

My analysis here draws on literature in Native studies, anthropology, and political theory regarding settler colonialism, sovereignty, and recognition. In Nicaragua's context of settler

capitalism and fractally recursive colonialism, decisions to seek state recognition, participate in state processes, or pursue autonomy are vexed by political risks. Seeking state recognition and participation in state legal processes risks reinforcing settler sovereignty by accepting the settler state's authority as ultimate arbiter (Coulthard 2014; Hale 2005; Povinelli 2002; A. Simpson 2014). At the same time, the alternative of taking direct action and claiming authority beyond the settler state may articulate with the neoliberal withdrawal of the state, creating a scenario of autonomy without resources (Hernández Castillo 2016, 6; Mora 2017, 6–7; Stahler-Sholk 2007). Both strategies entail processes of subject formation that pose dangers to Indigenous and Afrodescendant authority. Participation in state processes typically entails contending with state actors' limits on the acceptable behavior of Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples; those who exceed the bounds of the indio permitido face exclusion and dismissal (Hale 2004). Through this mode of subject formation, settler authorities seek to create a class of Indigenous and Afrodescendant legal, political, and administrative professionals who articulate demands and denunciations through technical language and with respect for settler sovereignty. Likewise, participation in autonomy without resources articulates with the neoliberal aim of forming entrepreneurial subjects who take responsibility for succeeding or failing to generate their own resources in the absence of external support (Erazo 2013; Gustafson 2009).[1] In practice, these approaches typically overlap, with communities choosing to both "use and refuse the law" (Hale 2020). Even in cases where Indigenous and Afrodescendant communities see little long-term value in legal strategies, going through legal processes can save lives and obstruct dispossession in the short-term, which may ultimately bolster other forms of struggle (Hale 2020, 627; Ybarra 2018, 123).

This chapter begins with a brief history of conservation and protected areas in the Rama-Kriol Territory before delving into the vigilance activities carried out in the communities of Indian River and Greytown. I describe the two approaches to vigilance activities—recognition and sovereignty—and their manifestations for Rama and Kriol people, the conservationist groups funding the forest rangers, and the state. I conclude by analyzing the current conjuncture and the risks posed by each strategy amid an increasingly authoritarian settler state.

Conservation in the Rama-Kriol Territory

In the final years of the 1980s, the first FSLN government pursued peace in Nicaragua's southern Caribbean coast through two tracks. First, it negotiated the Autonomy Statute for the Caribbean coast, which was approved as Law 28 in 1987. Second, it negotiated with the Costa Rican government in an effort to create a transborder protected area on either side of their eastern border along the San Juan River. As discussed in Chapter 3, this region had seen intense conflict between the Sandinista Popular Army and Contra forces aligned with Edén Pastora's ARDE, including MISURASATA. They operated out of bases in Costa Rica south of the San Juan River and Lake Nicaragua. A "fortress conservation"-style protected area on either side of the border could allow the Nicaraguan and Costa Rican states to establish control over this region and prevent renewed fighting as the war wound down. President Ortega had suggested creating Nature Reserves for Peace in 1985, and this culminated in a 1988 proposal for an International System of Protected Areas for Peace (SI-A-PAZ, meaning Yes to Peace) with support from European governments and the International Union for Conservation of Nature (Barquet 2015). Only a week before he left office in 1990, Daniel Ortega issued Decree 527, which officially established Nicaragua's protected areas within SI-A-PAZ, including the Great San Juan River

Indio-Maíz Biological Reserve. Nevertheless, over the following decade, thousands of ex-combatants from both sides of the war ended up clearing lands and establishing themselves within the reserve, having been resettled either in the reserve or in areas just outside of it (Nygren 2003). Others who had lived in the reserve before the war returned there, sometimes coming into conflict with the new settlers. As discussed in Chapter 3, Rama and Kriol people also established themselves in the reserve, either returning after wartime displacement or moving there for the first time after hearing about a bountiful place where their ancestors had once lived.

As the neoliberal 1990s took hold in Nicaragua, two approaches to conservation governance emerged in southeastern Nicaragua. On the one hand, NGOs like Fundación del Río, often with international funding, sought to develop sustainable livelihoods and environmental consciousness among mestizo settlers along the western edge of the reserve. On the other hand, the right-wing governments deployed military force in failed efforts to forcibly remove settlers from the reserve. In 1999, the government of Arnoldo Alemán decided to move the goalposts: it converted the Great San Juan River Indio-Maíz Biological Reserve into a patchwork of smaller reserves, establishing the 264,000-hectare Indio-Maíz Biological Reserve as the largest component of this new Southeastern Nicaragua Biosphere Reserve (Nygren 2004). Over time, settlers cleared lands further to the east as they exhausted their previous lands or sold them to others. They again came into conflict with the fortress conservation model, which, Anja Nygren (2004) notes, seemed to the settlers to be a major and unjustified reversal from previous governments' recognition of settlers' property rights in the area based on the Lockean notion of infusing labor into the land—that is, by clearing forests from territories long stewarded by Afro-Indigenous peoples. This fortress conservation also affected Rama and Kriol people living in the area; the military and Ministry of the Environment and Natural Resources (MARENA) did not

distinguish between settlers and Rama and Kriol people who had lived in and with Indio-Maíz for centuries. Rama and Kriol people were regularly blocked from entering the reserve (Mueller 2001, 71–74). This occurred despite several Rama families having received written authorization from two consecutive mayors of San Juan de Nicaragua to live in, and use resources from, Indio-Maíz. Community members recount being prevented by the military from using trees for their dories (small boats); some also allege that the military permitted settlers to enter Indio-Maíz while targeting Rama and Kriol people for harassment and confiscations of materials from the reserve. In 2009, after years of bitter complaints from Rama and Kriol community members and the newly established communal governments, MARENA and the military withdrew from the bulk of their posts guarding the entrances to Indio-Maíz, including the strategic Dos Bocas post north of San Juan de Nicaragua that can monitor entry to the reserve via two main rivers.

When the Nicaraguan state issued the Rama-Kriol Territory title in 2009, some 80 percent of Indio-Maíz fell within the territory. Under Nicaragua's laws for protected areas and Indigenous and Afrodescendant communal lands, the only human presence permitted in Indio-Maíz is members of the Rama and Kriol communities and those authorized to conduct scientific research and conservation activities. The various levels of government—communal, territorial, municipal, regional/departmental, and central—are supposed to create a joint management plan for the reserve.

As discussed earlier in this dissertation, the settler colonization of Indio-Maíz and the Rama-Kriol Territory results from the actions of the Nicaraguan government, multinational corporations, and international institutions. Between the 1950s and 1990s, right-wing governments would use the Caribbean coast region as a reserve of supposedly free lands (Morris 2016, 359; Riverstone 2004, 62; Vilas 1990, 133). These governments relocate mestizo

campesinos from the Pacific and central regions to the Caribbean after they were displaced by natural disasters, land grabs for cattle, coffee, and cotton, and the wars of the 1970s and 1980s (Nygren 2004; Vilas 1990, 132–35). Meanwhile, foreign governments and IFIs provided financing and technical support for an expansion in cattle ranching, much of which went to the Caribbean coast regions (Bermúdez et al. 2015). Over time, the settlers have pushed further toward the Caribbean. This movement is financed by the growing cattle and gold sectors, which use stolen Indigenous and Afrodescendant lands as pastures for fattening cattle before slaughter and areas for gold exploration and mining (Mittal 2020). Some 95 percent of Nicaraguan beef is for export, nearly half of which goes to the United States; nearly 80 percent of Nicaraguan gold comes to the U.S. ("Why the U.S. is Ortega's top trade partner" 2022). Today, settlers have effectively reached the Caribbean Sea. Recent years have seen armed settlers displacing Rama and Kriol people from their hunting grounds, fishing areas, agricultural plots, and homes within Indio-Maíz, forcing those displaced to relocate or seek wage labor outside the territory. The displacement has been catastrophic. It undermines the food sovereignty and access to traditional medicines of Rama and Kriol people; it also requires additional participation in the market and less time with the lands where most would prefer to continue living.

To combat this racialized dispossession, the three Rama and Kriol communities that overlap with Indio-Maíz partnered with an international conservation NGO in 2015 to create a communal forest ranger program. The NGO provides funding for training, wages, and equipment for a group of forest rangers from each community, who go on roughly monthly patrols into the overlapping zone of the Rama-Kriol Territory and Indio-Maíz, each patrol lasting one-to-two weeks. Rangers conduct a variety of activities, including clearing trails that mark the edges of the territory, building outposts for overnighting in the reserve, and investigatory patrols like the one I

described in the introduction. The targets for routine patrols are decided jointly by the communal governments, a database manager within the communities, and NGO staff. At the end of patrols, the database manager prepares reports for internal use and sometimes to be shared externally. The communities have also contracted a Rama lawyer from elsewhere in the territory to advise and represent them as they file legal complaints locally.

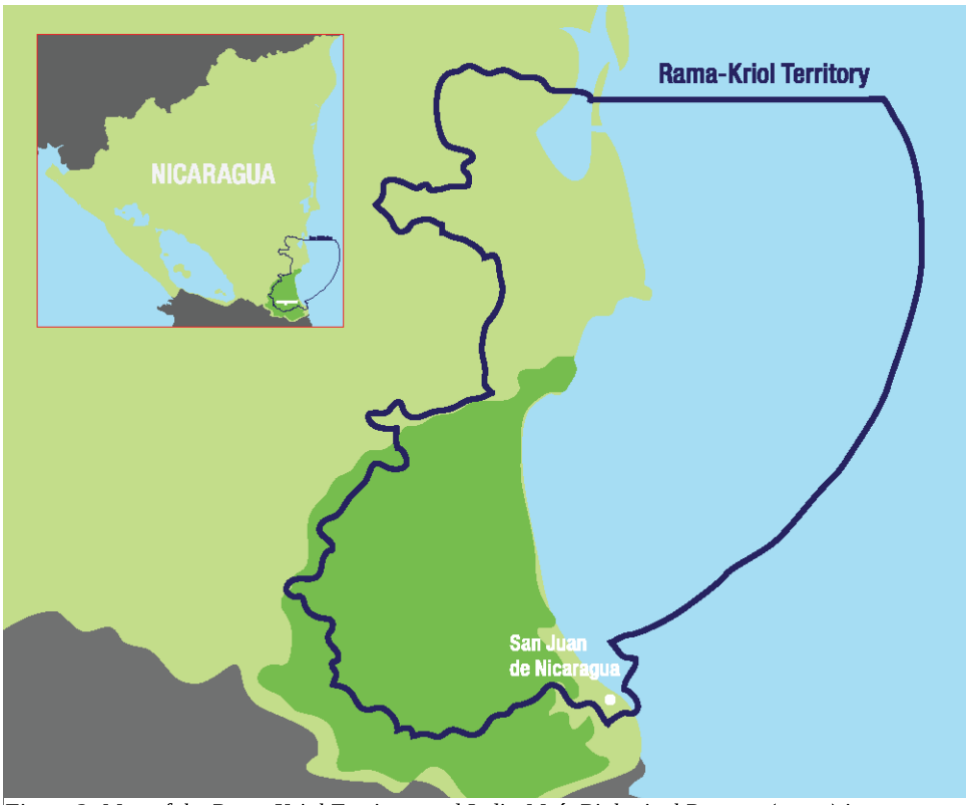

Figure 2: Map of the Rama Kriol Territory and Indio-Maíz Biological Reserve (green) in Nicaragua. This map was first published in Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development (Mayer 2021).

Vigilance for Recognition

The communal forest ranger program originated in a plan to use procedural tactics to force the state to stop the colonization of the Rama-Kriol Territory. Community members and conservation NGOs knew that state officials were ignoring, or even facilitating, this colonization. A communal forest ranger program would intervene in this problem in two ways. First, the forest

rangers could systematically document settler incursions into the territory and Indio-Maíz. The resulting data would inform legal complaints and reports to the state. They could also shape future interventions to protect endangered species like the Baird's tapir and great green macaw. And, of course, these data could contribute to the NGO's future grant proposals. Second, and especially important for the Rama and Kriol communities, the ranger patrols would increase the physical presence of Rama and Kriol people in the territory. Many Rama and Kriol people have told me that they see their territorial rights as linked to their presence in, and knowledge of, the territory.

After rangers find new settlers, the communities' lawyer may prepare a complaint to be filed with local authorities. These complaints particularly focus on settlers who have taken large swaths of land within the TR-K and Indio-Maíz—most prominently, a cattle rancher who has taken over 2,000 ha. and smuggles other ranchers' cattle onto the ranch for fattening before smuggling them back out for slaughter and export (Ríos and Mendoza 2017). Complaints are submitted to the local judge, the Nicaraguan National Police, MARENA, the military, and the relevant municipal government. In nearly all cases, the reports have been met with silence. Paulina, a 37-year-old Rama woman, took a skeptical stance toward this legal approach. We talked while she folded her children's clothing, and she told me, "They make them [report] and fold them up so—like clothes." James, a 57-year-old Kriol forest ranger, took a skeptical stance on this legal approach. Speaking in Spanish, he told me, "Just a bit ago, we went on a patrol and saw how they were destroying Ibo Walk. … You go and you can't do anything. You can only gather evidence and bring it [to the government], and that's where it stops. There's no support from the government."[2] State authorities have shown little interest in acting to remove settlers;

communal government members tell me that their complaints are typically met with the refrain, "We can't move without orders from above."

The Rama-Kriol communal governments have persisted through their frustration with this lack of state action. They have continued submitting complaints and additional documentation, and many communal government members have told me they hope to use this paper trail to eventually bring a lawsuit to the Inter-American Court. For some in the communities, this is all part of what is often called "the process." This refers to the idea that there is a long-term legal process through which the full territorial rights and self-determination of the Rama and Kriol peoples will be restored and protected. As one community leader explained it to me, the process began during the Contra war of the 1980s. At that time, community leaders on Rama Cay participated in negotiations with the Sandinista government over the autonomy regime for the Caribbean coast. Subsequent right-wing governments failed to respect Afro-Indigenous territorial rights under the agreement, so several communities filed lawsuits against the governments' actions. These wound their way through domestic courts to no avail. In 2001, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights heard an appeal and ordered the Nicaraguan state to demarcate and title Indigenous territories. After more lawsuits, the Rama and Kriol peoples finally received their territorial title in 2009. In this progressive narrative, the next step is to file a lawsuit to force the state to remove settlers.

In general, community leaders have engaged with "the process" by submitting additional complaints and additional documentation in hopes that the Nicaraguan state will respond or that it will eventually be possible to bring a case before the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. Charles R. Hale, revisiting the aftermath of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights decision that first ordered communal land titling in 2001, notes, "With the victory came newly endorsed

rights, and at the same time, a deepened dependence on the sovereign to implement and safeguard these concessions" (2020, 621). This dependence entails a disciplinary process. After years of litigation, communal government members know empirically and from the advice of their lawyers that they must act strictly according to the law and in accordance with the dominant justification for Indigenous and Afrodescendant land rights—namely, cultural difference between supposedly discrete communities and the national majority—for their lawsuits to have any chance of succeeding. This is part of the process of forming the indio permitido: a "sociopolitical category" that describes "how governments are using cultural rights to divide and domesticate indigenous movements" (Hale 2004, 17). Communal government meetings I have attended often dedicate significant attention to analyzing laws and ensuring compliance. Among the behaviors that are often placed outside the bounds of the permissible Indian are direct actions to remove settlers and arrangements that involve collaboration with viejos vivientes (long-time resident settlers) without valid titles or more recent settler arrivals.[3] Lawyers and many communal government members insist that compliance with these limits and performances of appropriate cultural difference from settlers will result in positive legal outcomes, even if only at the international level and after many years of waiting. More than two decades after that decision, the dominant viewpoint remains that it is worth pursuing legal channels to enforce territorial rights.

Still, the use of vigilance to pursue state recognition is neither solely a result of this dependence, nor is it a universal stance. In recent months, several Rama community members delivered an ultimatum to the Rama-Kriol Territorial Government: either remove the settlers who have threatened us and occupied our lands, or we will stop working with you. The territorial government did not respond. I asked a legal advisor to the territorial government about the

ultimatum. She told me, "If I say, 'Let's remove them,' and [the settlers] kill one of we? Who would have the blame? [Community members] would say I kill [their] son." She did not expect that a new order from the Inter-American Court would result in sudden state action against the settlers. Instead, she said that she hoped an order would do two things. First, it would create a legal basis for action at a less politically dangerous time in the country. Second, it could result in scrutiny of international financing to the Nicaraguan government, which could put pressure on the government to act in the shorter term. Other community members have said to me that they would like to form an armed group to expel the settlers, but they choose not to do so because there are thousands more settlers than there are Rama and Kriol people in the territory. In other words, there are practical and strategic considerations that discourage direct action in such a tense and potentially violent context. The decision to fight dispossession through proceduralist tactics is overdetermined; it results from some combination of the disciplinary effects of the politics of recognition, from an analysis of the risks of direct action, and from a belief that there may still be indirect benefits to a new court order, even if it will not change the nature of Nicaragua's settler state.

The use of vigilance to pursue proceduralism has had some partial victories. One example comes in the form of the international REDD+ financing discussed in Chapter 2. The Indian River and Greytown communities overwhelmingly opposed both the initial Forest Carbon Partnership Facility proposal and the later Green Climate Fund–Central American Bank of Economic Integration proposal. Data collected by the rangers played a role in the complaints filed against both proposals, ultimately contributing to the demise of the first and a lengthy delay in the implementation of the latter. There are no guarantees that the Green Climate Fund board will decide to cancel its investment or enforce stricter conditionalities related to Indigenous and

Afrodescendant peoples. Still, this does appear to demonstrate the continuing promise of "holding dominant systems to their own highest ideals" (Hale 2020, 627). This is especially the case when, unlike with the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, the international venue has established authority over the disbursement of funds to states.

Vigilance for Sovereignty

I interviewed Paulina, the Rama woman I mentioned earlier, in the wooden house she rents in San Juan for herself, her partner, and nine children. It was a typically wet and humid day in San Juan; I arrived in a brief gap between heavy rains. Paulina and her family moved to San Juan several years ago so her children could attend school. Previously, they had lived in a lush area three hours up the Indian River. Paulina and her partner hate living in town, but she sees it as necessary for her children. She and her partner are illiterate, and she wants her children to be able to read and write so they can find work if settlers take their lands. Paulina has adapted to life in town by baking coconut bread on her wood-fired stove. She started off selling it around town from a large plastic bucket, but her bread became so popular that she now can just wait for people to come to her house to buy it each evening. Soldiers from the military post in town can be counted on to buy at least ten loaves a day. She sells each loaf for C$10, or roughly 30 cents. With her income, she can buy rice, beans, sugar, salt, and coffee. Her partner paddles upriver each week and brings back fish, coconuts, taro, plantains, and sugar cane. That leaves enough money so that Paulina and her family could buy a parcel of land from the municipality and build a house instead of having to rent a decaying one from a family member. A well-connected mestiza friend had offered to help Paulina with this, but Paulina only laughed. Later, I followed up, asking Paulina why she didn't want to buy land and build her own house. She asked me,

“How we a buy the land when the land for we?” Why would we buy the land when the land is ours?

Our interview was a bit stilted and awkward at first. Our usual banter became unusually formal when mediated through my voice recorder. Paulina grabbed a knife and began scratching bits of flour from the wooden table where she had just prepared dough. By the end of the interview, she had warmed back up and was waxing poetic on community politics and the settlers. I asked her for her evaluation of the communal forest ranger program. She saw it as a good thing, she said, but the state wasn’t removing the settlers who the forest rangers found in the territory. She was tired of waiting for someone to act. “We have to look solution weself,” she told me. “We have to carry the process weself.”

The communal governments and the conservation NGO that funds the forest ranger program intend for it to produce evidence for legal complaints, but the program has always been intended to replace settler state authority with Rama-Kriol authority. Following Shiri Pasternak, if we want to understand sovereignty, we need to attend to jurisdiction, which she defines as “the authority to have authority” (2017, 2), and Justin Richland (2011) demonstrates that jurisdictional claims are the “the potentializing limit of sovereignty.” If the settler state devolves authority to the Rama-Kriol communities but retains the authority to revoke that devolution, the settler state is still fundamentally maintaining its own jurisdiction. On the other hand, when the Rama-Kriol communities build their authority outside of state procedures and in such a way that the state cannot simply override their authority on a whim, they are building their jurisdiction. In the Rama-Kriol Territory, communal forest rangers serve the purpose of claiming authority and asserting Rama-Kriol jurisdiction in the absence of the state. These claims and assertions

contribute to Rama-Kriol sovereignty—a resurgent sovereignty that opposes settler sovereignty but also coexists with it.

The original context for the communal forest ranger program was a six-year period of abandonment by state agencies—specifically, MARENA and the military—that began with their abovementioned withdrawal from Indio-Maíz in 2009. During that time, an international conservationist NGO working with the Rama and Kriol communities obtained funding for the communal forest ranger program, which would seek to make up for the state's absence. Unlike MARENA and the military, these forest rangers would not have authority under Nicaraguan law to expel settlers; instead, their principal aim would be vigilance. Nevertheless, the presence of Rama and Kriol forest rangers provides an appearance of Rama and Kriol authority in the territory. Aside from going on patrols, the rangers have created a material presence in the reserve. They have installed signs warning that hunting and deforestation are prohibited in the territory and Indio-Maíz (Fig. 5). They have also built three ranger posts, which we visited on the patrol I mentioned earlier. The most symbolically important post is the one at Dos Bocas, where the Indian River and Caño Negro meet (Figs. 2 and 3). As we passed it, we could first see the rotting wooden stations built by MARENA and the military in the early 2000s. When we moved further upriver, we heard hammers and saws. Then, a new wooden post came into view, as did a team of Rama and Kriol construction workers who were finishing it. The image of the new, Rama-Kriol post alongside the abandoned and deteriorating state posts created a striking display of resurgent Rama-Kriol authority.

The communal forest rangers also assert their authority through acts of vigilance during encounters with settlers. In that same patrol, forest rangers and communal government members visited settlers along the river and demanded information regarding their places of origin,

activities, and time in the territory.[4] Rangers photographed the settlers' homes and livestock while taking notes in journals, and communal government members demanded to see and photograph the settlers' identity documents. After these data were recorded, the president or vice president of the communal government then informed settlers of the specific laws they were violating, presented a copy of the territorial title, and told the settlers that they would need to leave (Fig. 4). Many of the settlers protested these acts of vigilance but ultimately gave in—likely in part because they were outnumbered and had seen the community members' bows and arrows. These acts of vigilance inherently challenge settler sovereignty; settler state sovereignty purports to be perfect and without a place for alternative sovereigns and jurisdiction. When Rama and Kriol people assert their own "authority to have authority" within their territory, they are making claims beyond the settler state; their acts of vigilance are unsanctioned by the Nicaraguan state or its laws. They claim a rationale for their actions that derives not from settler state recognition, but instead from a politics of Rama-Kriol sovereignty beyond the state. Relatedly, patrols bolster Rama and Kriol people's knowledge of the territory, which many community members have described to me as a key component of Rama-Kriol territorial belonging.[5]

Rama-Kriol uses of vigilance to assert authority have borne some fruit. During the August 2019 patrol, settlers were invited to attend a meeting where community leaders and forest rangers would share information about the laws governing communal lands and protected areas. Despite the high cost of gasoline and the loss of a half-day of agricultural work, roughly 20 settlers attended and expressed willingness to accept the authority of the Rama and Kriol communities. This meeting was not a one-off episode; the forest rangers have long collaborated with several of the families who attended the meeting. Those families keep the forest rangers

informed about newly arrived settlers and occasionally participate in the rangers' activities. They accept Rama-Kriol jurisdiction and bolster Rama-Kriol authority through vigilance activities.

A more controversial way in which settlers have been hailed into regimes of Rama-Kriol vigilance is through a proposed "human wall" in the buffer zone of Indio-Maíz. During a previous GTR-K administration (2014–18), territorial authorities decided to enter into lease agreements with settlers in the buffer zone in exchange for those settlers preventing or reporting any incursions into the territory through their rented lands. Settlers paid rent to the GTR-K based on the amount of land they have and the economic activities they are carrying out. It appears that over a hundred such lease agreements were made. This strategy has been highly controversial, in part because it was not approved by the communal authorities nearest to these lands, in part because the contracts never specified the settlers' vigilance responsibilities or consequences for violating them, and in part because the lands are in fact located outside of the titled territory. This final factor has been most controversial with conservationists who see it as an illegal act that jeopardizes part of Indio-Maíz over which the Rama and Kriol communities have no authority. The following GTR-K administration (2019–22) was also highly critical of these leases due to the lack of transparency over how the initial revenues were used. Nevertheless, I would argue that these leases should be understood as a jurisdictional claim—if a half-hearted one—made through the modality of vigilance. The arrangement fits with a centuries-long history of Indigenous authorities in the region claiming jurisdiction through land grants to settlers in areas beyond the authorities' control (Offen 1999, 291–92). While the execution of this effort has not achieved the stated aims of the "human wall," it has created a class of settlers who recognize Rama-Kriol authority and developed a new model that could be deployed in the territory to assert further control along the frontier of colonization.

Despite some early successes in using vigilance to build Rama-Kriol sovereignty, there are also warning signs that the Rama and Kriol communities could face autonomy without resources. The Nicaraguan government canceled the legal status of more than 3,000 NGOs in 2022 ("Worst Year for NGOs: Ortega Regime Closed 3,108 Organizations in 2022" 2023), and staff for conservation NGOs working in Indio-Maíz worry that they could be next. The Rama and Kriol communities have spent the last few years trying to develop new, sustainable revenues to fund the forest ranger program on their own, but these efforts are at a very early stage. Meanwhile, ruling party officials have threatened to withhold tax revenues collected on behalf of the communities unless Rama-Kriol leaders follow the ruling party line.

This bleak scenario raises the importance of interdependency for the future of Rama-Kriol authority. According to Jean Dennison, "Sovereignty operates as an ongoing process of engagement with other authorities. It is an insistence on one's authority without the illusion of full control, a mess of negotiations and interruptions, which almost always lead to further entanglements" (2017, 685). Sovereign entanglements in the Rama-Kriol Territory have given the communities various points of leverage. Often, these entanglements emerge through the use of proceduralist avenues. Using institutional channels, the communities have gained leverage over the state through their complaints against Forest Carbon Partnership Facility and Green Climate Fund financing. The communities may also be able to leverage settlers' need for recognition from Rama-Kriol institutions. For example, when settlers have to provide documentation for agricultural loans, they must either forge a title or work out a lease agreement with the territorial government. The idea of issuing lease agreements is a subject of intense debate in the communities. Still, the past willingness of settlers to recognize Rama-Kriol

authority is suggestive that this strategy could be pushed further. The Rama and Kriol communities have set the stage for each of these points of leverage through vigilance.

Even those who are deeply frustrated with the lack of action are still hopeful for the future. I asked James, the Kriol forest ranger, what his fears were for the future. "Fear?" he asked me. "What I have is hope. If we remove the [settlers], what we must think about is how to plant the seeds for something and raise all of us up. Yes, that is the hope, because there's still time…."[6]

Figure 3 (top left): The abandoned, deteriorating military post at Dos Bocas. Figure 4 (top right): The old MARENA control post (left) alongside construction of new communal forest ranger station (right) at Dos Bocas. Figure 5 (bottom left): A Rama communal government member (far right) and two community members armed with bows and arrows (far left, center-left) inform two new settlers (center, center-right) that they have deforested communal lands in a protected area and must leave. Figure 6 (bottom right): A sign installed by communal forest rangers reading, "Core area, Indio-Maíz Biological Reserve. Indigenous territory, deforestation and hunting prohibited. Law 445. Rama-Kriol Territory Government." Photos by author, 2019.

Conclusion

This chapter has analyzed Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples' vigilance as a strategy that may articulate with *both* a politics of recognition-based proceduralism *and* a politics of resurgent sovereignty. Their vigilance is a tactic to resist dispossession that articulates *both* with a political horizon of state recognition *and* a horizon of resurgent Rama-Kriol sovereignty. My argument is that vigilance is a *bivalent* tactic; it has the potential to serve both of these political horizons simultaneously. This bivalency makes vigilance a dominant tactic that unites Rama and Kriol people who may disagree on broader strategies. It allows the communities to simultaneously use and refuse the law and to keep their options open for future legal strategies and direct action. I am arguing that the pursuit of recognition and the pursuit of sovereignty are not mutually exclusive insofar as the bivalent tactic of vigilance allows Rama and Kriol people to pursue them both. In this way, bivalent tactics can turn state strategies of containment and dividing-and-conquering on their head.

As white supremacist, authoritarian retrenchment continues in much of Central America, social scientists should particularly attend to how Afro-Indigenous peoples contend with demise of any semblance of judicial independence—particularly in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala. In the total absence of domestic judicial remedies or timely decisions from the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples in Nicaragua have turned to IFIs' internal watchdogs, both in the GCF case described here and on other occasions in which I have participated. Though I would predict that IFIs will eventually limit the authority or independence of their internal watchdogs to keep capital flowing, there may be a possibility of using internal watchdogs' findings to shape settler state behavior in the short term—and

potentially strengthen Indigenous and Afrodescendant sovereignty in the longer term. Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples' vigilance will inevitably play a critical role in these processes.

Notes

[1] While "autonomy without resources" can pose risks, it can also create opportunities, as seen in the experience of tribal nations in North America that have successfully combined their treaty rights with national entrepreneurialism to strengthen their sovereignty (Cattelino 2008). I am grateful to Shannon Speed for suggesting this irony of *settler* neoliberal capitalism.

[2] "Hace poco que fuimos a la gira, miramos como están destruyendo ahí en lado de Ibo Walk. … Uno va y uno no puede hacer nada. Sólo se recoge la evidencia y [la] trae [al gobierno], y hasta ahí llegó porque no hay apoyo … del gobierno."

[3] The category of viejo viviente refers to settlers who have long lived in the territory and accept the authority of the Rama and Kriol communities. This category is formalized under Law 445, Nicaragua's communal land demarcation and titling law, as a reference to those specific viejos vivientes who already had valid land titles within Indigenous and Afrodescendant territories prior to the approval of the Autonomy Statute for the Caribbean coast in 1987. However, many viejos vivientes with positive relationships with the Rama and Kriol communities—often including kinship relations—lack valid titles and are excluded from the legal category. This has resulted in disputes within communities and between the communities and state authorities, who insist that only those identified as Rama and Kriol may participate in communal decision-making. This results in rigid ideas of race and belonging that undermine communal authority and autonomy.

[4] Rangers and community leaders have been very interested in acquiring training in interview techniques that would allow them to obtain more useful data from settlers. For example, when I trained community co-researchers during a 2022 visit to San Juan de Nicaragua, I also held a training in interview methods requested by the communal government. Community leaders, rangers, and roughly a dozen other community members participated in the workshop.

[5] A recurring theme in my data is the valorization of knowledge of specific features of the territory as a desirable quality for leaders and a rationale for Rama and Kriol communal land rights. For example, a communal government leader complained to me, "Imagine, plenty of us don't even know how much *mojones* [cement boundary markers] we get." Communal forest ranger patrols build this kind of knowledge and thus support Rama and Kriol ideas of territorial belonging.

[6] "¿El temor? Ideay. Lo que yo tengo es esperanza… Si sacan [a los colonos] de aquí, lo que tenemos que pensar es como sembrar algo y levantar todo entre todos. Sí, eso es la esperanza, porque todavía hay tiempo…."

Conclusion

As I developed, researched, and wrote this dissertation, I often felt two competing impulses—one based on my positionality, and one based on my political commitments. First, I have sought to produce a dissertation that does not pretend that I—a white settler from the United States—can or should provide a traditional ethnography of Indigenous and Afrodescendant communities. I have not attempted a comprehensive description of Rama and Kriol histories, perspectives, or cultural life, which would by necessity be an extractive endeavor if my name appeared at the top of it. It also would not be possible in a community-collaborative project; the communal governments and individual community members limit what information and narratives they tell me and explicitly delineate what information and narratives should be withheld from a public audience. Instead, this dissertation has taken aim at the structural conditions of fractally recursive, settler colonial capitalism as experienced and resisted in the Rama-Kriol Territory. Working with the communities, I have sought to do this without voyeuristically portraying suffering and misery. This has meant focusing attention on institutions beyond the traditional anthropological site to understand mechanisms, and not only effects, of settler colonial capitalism and imperialism. The result of this approach has been my theoretical contribution on fractally recursive colonialism, which seeks to capture the material and ideological linkages that reproduce structures of domination at different scales across settler colonies and empires.

Second, I have still sought to center Rama and Kriol people, community life, histories, and politics in relation to these structures of domination. Again, this approach was inevitable in a community-collaborative project; the communal governments and individual community members insisted that their stories should be told in my work. This is especially evident in the

oral history interviews conducted for Chapter 3. The communal governments were highly engaged in the research, including through their appointment of my co-researchers and co-authors for the chapter. During the research process, interviewees regularly sought me out to provide additional information. Even after discussing the risks, the majority of interviewees insisted on their real names appearing in the dissertation so that their stories would be told—for an international audience and for future generations in the community. One day, I hope it is possible to fully honor this request; in the short term, it has been necessary to redact their names due to the dramatic increase in risks that community members have faced between the time I filed this dissertation in 2023 and the time the embargo will expire in 2025.

These competing impulses at the level of research design and methods set the stage for what I see as this dissertation's contributions. The concept of fractally recursive colonialism emerged through nearly simultaneous ethnographic attention to Rama and Kriol peoples' lived experiences of racism, dispossession, and exploitation and to U.S. imperialism's institutional arrangements that dominate Global South countries like Nicaragua. Through this dual attention, it became clear that U.S. imperialism was involved in reproducing the structure of U.S. settler colonialism in Nicaragua. The U.S. and Nicaragua have such divergent histories and power in the world that it might be unproductive or inappropriate to draw analogies between their forms of colonialism in the abstract. But the relationship *is not abstract.* The striking similarities between my ethnographic observations and settler colonialism in the U.S. were not mere coincidences or convergences within the capitalist world system. As I conducted archival and library research, I found that U.S. government actors—later joined by IFI officials—were using the relation of imperial power between the U.S. and Nicaragua to transmit ideological tools and capital that facilitated, rationalized, and accelerated similar forms of settler colonialism in Nicaragua—from

James Buchanan's negotiations with his British counterpart (see Chapter 1) to the Green Climate Fund's proposed financing in Nicaragua (see Chapter 2). Again, they were not similar by chance; they were similar because they were extensions of U.S. settler capitalism at home and were designed to expand the ambit of U.S. profits from settler colonialism in Abya Yala.[1] Of course, Nicaragua was not a blank slate on which U.S. imperialism operated; Spanish settler colonialism prepared the ground for this relationship of fractal recursivity and generated a structure of the conjuncture (see Sahlins 1985). Existing racial projects and geographies of Spanish settler colonialism, for example, became reconfigured in their interaction with U.S. imperialism.

The analysis and stakes of ethnographic research with the Rama and Kriol communities change when beginning from the premise that colonization on Nicaragua's Caribbean coast is in a relationship of fractal recursivity with U.S. imperialism. First, when Rama and Kriol people—and other Afro-Indigenous peoples—experience racialized and gendered violence and dispossession, it is not merely a tragedy that results from the coloniality of Nicaraguan society. Rather, they are experiencing violence and dispossession that derives financially and ideologically from settler capitalism in the Global North and that generates further capital for future violent and dispossessive projects. It generates growth that allows the vassal Nicaraguan state to continue paying its debt-based tributes to the Global North, preventing yet another imperialist military endeavor to re-establish compliance. It also generates wealth and power for elites in both the metropole and, to a lesser extent, Nicaragua.

Second, when Rama and Kriol people conjure territory, they are necessarily disrupting extractive flows of capital from Nicaragua to the Global North. By combatting the enclosure of their territory, they prevent the extraction of surplus value from, for example, the gold and beef sectors, which primarily export to the U.S. They also prevent the use of their territory as a

reserve of land for resettlement of campesinos displaced from elsewhere in Nicaragua, which, in turn, makes more politically difficult the land-intensive activities that displace campesinos (e.g., mining, cattle ranching, African palm, coffee, and sugar). By disrupting these profits, Rama and Kriol people—together with other Afro-Indigenous peoples in Nicaragua—challenge the entire imperial order in which the Global North extracts surplus value from primary commodity production and interest from imposed debts while mediating this extraction through the settler state. Unlike when a national government challenges this order, as with the revolutionary FSLN government in the 1980s, it would be more difficult—though certainly in keeping with its history—for the U.S. to remove the entire Afro-Indigenous population than to remove a single government.

Third, Rama and Kriol political thought and practices aimed at conjuring territory are, then, fundamentally anti-colonial, anti-racist, and even revolutionary. In their work to disrupt the violent process of racialized dispossession, Rama and Kriol people of course disrupt the colonization of their own territory and the racial projects that situate them as dispossessable—for example, Soraya's discussion of laziness in Chapter 3. But their work far exceeds their own territory. When Rama and Kriol people conjure territory, they disrupt the accumulation of capital that may then be used for further racialized dispossession, which is key to satisfying the growth imperative under the capitalist mode of production and especially the present, heavily debt-driven form of capitalism. Rama-Kriol territorial conjurings reduce the capital available for mining in other territories in Nicaragua and Latin America, for example, but they also reduce capital available for extractive projects in settler colonies of the Global North, particularly when aggregated with similar movements against enclosure and extraction around the world. This is not to say that Rama-Kriol efforts to conjure their territory are rooted in explicitly revolutionary,

anti-capitalist thinking. Indeed, a significant number of Rama and Kriol people are avowed anti-communists who view their dispossession as a result, at least in part, of the current Nicaraguan government's ideology, which they see as communist. In interviews and informal conversations, though, even self-professed anti-communists articulated an understanding that the source of this dispossession, beyond the behavior of the current Nicaraguan government, lies with international economic interests profiting off of the enclosure of their lands.

These points lead to another conclusion with enormous political stakes. The U.S. relation of imperialism with Nicaragua drives settler colonialism in Nicaragua for the reasons and in the ways stated above. That relationship of imperialism and the form of colonialism it reproduces in Nicaragua derive from settler colonialism in North America, among other processes. The profits extracted through this relationship of fractally recursive settler capitalism feed into the capital that extracts globally—in countries like Nicaragua, but also in gold mines, cattle ranching operations, and fossil fuel extraction in North America. To disrupt this circular relationship, Afro-Indigenous peoples in the Global South cannot fight alone. In their countries, they often face U.S.-trained and -equipped government forces that will use violence in their desperation to maintain revenues and currency reserves from extractive industries to pay their northward tributes. Likewise, in North America, liberatory movements face a settler capitalist war machine financed by extraction in the Global South. This means that liberation in the Global South is all but contingent upon the overthrow of U.S. imperialism, and the overthrow of the U.S. imperialist machinery is all but contingent upon the cutting off its revenues in the Global South. Neither the facile anti-imperialism of the Nicaraguan government's sycophants (e.g., Perry 2020) nor reliance on imperialist institutions to police settler colonial violence in Nicaragua (e.g., Orozco 2023) can address the problems they identify using the tools they propose. U.S. imperialism is

strengthened, not weakened, by the violent dispossession that the Nicaraguan government incentivizes. Violent dispossession of Afro-Indigenous peoples in Nicaragua is strengthened, not weakened, by U.S. imperialist domination in the world. The only prospect for addressing these problems is for deep solidarity among Afro-Indigenous peoples and other anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, anti-patriarchal, and anti-racist forces across Abya Yala and the world.

Rama and Kriol people are keenly aware of this need for solidarity. This dissertation itself results from the Rama and Kriol communities' interest in community-collaborative research to analyze their current conjuncture for the sake of their own understanding and that of readers elsewhere in the world. In my recent meetings in the communities, community members have expressed particular interest in meeting with Black and Indigenous peoples and movements in North America to share experiences and develop relationships of solidarity. Though the Nicaraguan government has sought to cut off these possibilities through restrictions on entry to the country (e.g., *La Prensa* 2022; *La Prensa* 2023), new opportunities have emerged, particularly as a growing number of Afro-Indigenous peoples from Nicaragua have entered the diaspora in North America over the past two years.

The stakes of this hemispheric struggle could not be higher. In the age of climate catastrophe, planetary wellbeing depends upon the Rama and Kriol peoples—and their counterparts elsewhere in the world—conjuring territory and getting free. Only through hemispheric decolonization is it possible to break away from the growth imperative and the constant advance of enclosure that increases carbon emissions and diminishes natural carbon sequestration and biodiversity. This decolonization will require a transformational shift in relations both among humans and between humans and the non-human world. It will take a shift away from relations of white supremacy and exploitation and toward relations of care. Shifting

toward relations of care among humans necessarily means that Afro-Indigenous peoples like the Rama and Kriol peoples will be the ones to lead that shift.

Notes

[1] See also Paula Butler's (2015) work demonstrating that Canadian mining companies in Africa extend Canadian settler colonial logics and dynamics beyond Canadian borders.

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