

AS LONG AS YOU'RE A BLACK WO/MAN YOU'RE AN AFRICAN:
CREOLE DIASPORIC POLITICS IN THE AGE OF MESTIZO NATIONALISM

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Nicaragua, along with most—if not all—Central American nations is seldom considered to have a Black or Afro-Latino population. Despite the legacies of colonial Black erasure that bleed into the present day, however, Nicaragua's Southern Atlantic Coast in particular has been home to Afro-descendants since the early 17th century. Part of Nicaragua's historical narrative of Black erasure has to do with the white supremacist mestizo nationalism that has plagued the nation since before independence in 1821. While Spanish colonial ideology led to notions of white supremacy on the Pacific coast of the country, the Atlantic Coast was also subject to similar ideological formations under British colonial rule. For reasons relating to white supremacist ideology, colonialism, imperialism, and structural racism, Nicaragua's Black populations have not always identified as Black. This senior thesis focuses on the Afro-Nicaraguan Creole population in Caribbean Nicaragua, recent appeals to Black identity, and Creole claims to a global Black diaspora. Through an ethnographic exploration of Atlantic Coast history, Creole ethno-genesis, and the racist mestizo nationalist practices of the Nicaraguan state, this project highlights the emerging social movement of Creole Black diasporic politics as deployed through aesthetic production and argues that Creoles are not solely operating under Gramscian "common sense" or legal frameworks to work against the violence of structural and patriarchal anti-Black racism in Nicaragua, but are also imagining what a larger freedom might look like outside national and legal boundaries.

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Introduction:

Nicaraguan Mestizo Nationalism and the Problem of the Mosquitia

*“So don't care where you come from
As long as you're a black man you're an African
No mind your complexion
There is no rejection you're an
African”
-Peter Tosh, “African”*

Along with a number of Black Nationalist reggae hits produced in the 1970s, Peter Tosh's famous call to African diasporic consciousness is emblematic of the genre's commitment to Pan-African, Garveyite politics. Considering the ease with which roots reggae circulates throughout the Anglophone Caribbean and its diaspora, it should come as no surprise that Tosh's Afro-centric message has made its way across the Caribbean and into the diasporic imaginary of Afro-Nicaraguan Creoles. Though large populations of Creoles can be found in the Nicaraguan capital of Managua and US cities like Miami and San Francisco today, their home-base since Creole ethno-genesis in the late 18th century has been the Southern Atlantic Autonomous Region (RAAS) of Nicaragua in towns like Bluefields, Pearl Lagoon, and the off-shore Corn Islands.

In recent decades, it has become increasingly clear that Black and Afro-descendent struggles in Latin America are being taken up from a position of Afro-diasporic consciousness (Hanchard 1994; Paschel and Sawyer 2008; Paschel 2008). The power, for example, that Tosh's words in “African” (1977) have had on Creoles in terms of raced self-making—despite their overt masculine-centric perspective—can be gauged through everyday references to Tosh's lyrics and claims to a global Black identity. When asked where Black identity in Bluefields comes from, forty-eight-year-old resident Ms. Leslie Thomas and fifty-six-year-old visiting expatriate Mr. Melvin Carter both cited Tosh's lyrics as central to their understanding of Blackness in Nicaragua,

stating that as long as one is Black one has an African identity. Ten and eighteen, respectively, during the 1977 release of Tosh's "African," Ms. Leslie and Mr. Melvin both likely belong to the first few generations of Creoles who began to strongly assert a Black identity in the wake of the growing nationalist, anti-imperialist revolutionary FSLN (Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional) party in the 1970s.

Of the three branches of Creole political thought that emerged during this pre-revolutionary period, Ms. Leslie and Mr. Melvin would have pertained to the anti-racist, anti-colonial organizing of SICC (Southern Indigenous Creole Community). SICC's organizing stood in contradistinction to the Creole culturalist and Black Sandinista social movements of the same time as it connected the racist policies and practices facing Creoles not only to colonial and imperialistic forces outside of Nicaragua but also to the historical *mestizo* (mixed, with an emphasis on indigenous and Spanish rather than African descent) nationalism characteristic of the Pacific region of Nicaragua (Gordon 1998: 180). The Creole culturalist movement led by leading Creole historian Donovan Brautigam Beer held that Creoles were British descendents—not African or Black—and faced ethnocentrism rather than racism at the hands of Nicaraguan mestizo nationalists, while the Black Sandinistas attributed the racism facing Creoles to British colonialism and US imperialism alone (Gordon 1998: 172, 177). The disparate politics of these three social movements mirror the disparate ethno-racial identification among Creoles deeply rooted in the colonial history of Nicaragua. Seemingly essentialist and Afro-centric in nature, Ms. Leslie and Mr. Melvin's claims to Africa as origin and "homeland" are significant not only because historically Creoles have not always identified as Black, but also because they reflect the pro-Black/Black pride stances among Creoles that have only increased since the 1970s and are characteristic of the larger Black struggle and social movement among Creoles and other Black Central Americans today.

In order to better comprehend the disparities in Creole ethno-racial and diasporic identification, it is critical on the one hand to consider both colonial and Creole history as well as Creole ethno-genesis in Nicaragua. On the other hand, it is precisely Nicaragua's state formation and colonial history—in addition to the movement of peoples and ideas across borders in the current globalized era—that contextualizes the rise of Creole diasporic politics and Creole identification as Black. The detailed account of Nicaraguan colonial history and nationalist ideology that ensues thus works to situate Creoles as African diasporic peoples in the geopolitical and racialized space they inhabit which has shaped their identity formation and negotiation over time.

Historically known as the Mosquitia or Mosquito Coast, the Atlantic region of Nicaragua was for centuries subject to domination by competing Spanish and British rule. The Spanish successfully colonized the Pacific region of Nicaragua by 1524, and although they laid claim to the Atlantic coast as part of their colonial empire, most attempts at entry and subjugation of the indigenous populations were futile given the difficulty of traversing the region's physical topography (Decker and Keener 1998:3; Floyd 1967). The first British regional contacts are thought to have occurred between the early to mid-17th century when, following the five year Anglo-Spanish War of 1625, British captains were ordered to weaken the Spanish enemy via attacks on their settlements, as well as to "occupy any land not held by Spain" (Floyd 1967:18). Thus, shortly after the occupation of Providence and San Andres Islands approximately 200 kilometers off the Mosquito Coast, the British began to occupy other settlements along the shore primarily for trading expeditions, including Cape Gracias a Dios in the north and Bluefields in the south (Floyd 1967:18). At the Cape, British troops established relations with the Miskitu Indians and laid the groundwork for what would soon become intense trade and working relations between

them, while in Bluefields Englishmen established mahogany, indigo, and sugar plantations to be worked by imported Black slaves primarily from Jamaica (Dozier 1985:11). Along with the mixed Afro-indigenous descendants of an early 17th century slave shipwreck (Dozier 1985:12), these African slaves are considered to have constituted the initial Black presence in Atlantic Nicaragua. In the 19th century when slavery was abolished, there was an increase in number of free West Indians of African descent who came to the Atlantic coast to labor on banana plantations (Gabbert 2011:40). Creoles, of mixed African, European, and indigenous heritage, are the descendants of both these enslaved and immigrant groups.

The geopolitical situation facing Creoles in the postcolonial moment is directly tied both to the colonial history of the Mosquitia and their long history of struggle for rights to land, sovereignty, and survival as an ethnic group free from racial discrimination in Nicaragua. In order to grasp the complexity of this struggle it is critical to take into account the longer histories and legacies of mestizo nationalism in Atlantic Nicaragua. Scholarship on the coast has addressed the direct relationship between Nicaraguan nationalist ideology and the “myth of mestizaje” in cementing white supremacy and anti-Black racism in Nicaragua (Gould 1998; Hooker 2005; Gudmundson 2010). By constructing Nicaragua as an ethnically homogeneous mestizo “nation-state” after independence in 1821, its criollo, or Spanish descendant “founders” played a major role in the omission of Pacific Blackness from national history as well as in the structural embedding of white supremacy.

Romero Vargas (1993) and Juliet Hooker (2010) discuss the origin myths that arose around Nicaraguan independence and the ways in which—in contrast to the racial dynamics in Pacific Nicaragua—the Black presence in the Mosquitia was seldom portrayed as secret and was in fact used to bolster nationalist notions of mestizaje and racial democracy. Through what

Hooker refers to as the “spacialization of race” and the “racialization of space,” criollo elites were able to construct the new Nicaraguan state—considered distinct from the Atlantic region given its colonial history—as having ended up with a mixture as close to Whiteness as possible. In other words, while Nicaraguan Blackness was relegated to the confines of Nicaragua’s Atlantic region, the Pacific “mainland” was able to not only racialize the Atlantic as Black but in that process racialize its largely mestizo inhabitants as white.

Gordon (1998) in his ethnographic study on identity politics on Nicaragua’s Southern Atlantic Coast critically analyzes notions of mestizaje and their role in the racial and cultural exclusion of Nicaraguan Afro-descendants. Elucidating the ways in which the Nicaraguan myth of mestizaje is intricately linked to the pathologization of Creoles, Gordon explains that the long-time perception of Blacks as foreigners in Nicaragua was used to justify their marginalization. This perceived foreignness is not only related to the fact that West Indian labor migration to the Atlantic coast occurred in the 19th and 20th centuries, but also to the notion that all Blacks come from Africa and thus have no claims to land or citizenship elsewhere.

Alongside Nicaraguan independence and the origin myth of mestizaje, there are a couple other key moments marking the ways in which postcolonial mestizo nationalism has negatively impacted the Caribbean coast. Referred to as “re-incorporation” by Hispanic Nicaraguans and “overthrow” (*uovatrúo*) by Creoles, this moment is the 1894 Nicaraguan military occupation and annexation of the Mosquitia. This event is now considered by Creoles to be the ultimate historical act of Nicaraguan mestizo nationalism and a grand attempt at Hispanicizing the Atlantic coast’s various ethnic groups. Annexation of the Mosquitia meant the military occupation of a region that had a vastly different history and process of identity formation than the rest of Nicaragua. The consequences of this internal colonial event included but were not limited to the

implementation of Spanish language policies in schools across the coast, the replacement of Creoles in business, government, and various professions with mestizos, and the superiority of the Spanish language over Creole and indigenous languages, especially for status, jobs, and education (Decker and Keener 1998:4-5; Gabbert 2011:37; Baracco 2011:124; Freeland 1988:26, 80). As the child of a mother who grew up on the Atlantic coast in the 1960s and 1970s, I am able to testify regarding the ways in which the mandatory law of Spanish instruction on the coast means that to this day my mother can only (and barely) write in Spanish even though Creole English is her native language.

The following key moment, next to independence and annexation, is the nationalist, anti-imperialist Sandinista Revolution of 1979 that toppled the three-decade-long Somoza regime and the ensuing civil war in the 1980s that many Creoles have thought of as a second overthrow. Craig (1992) writes that the revolution was widely rejected by Creoles and most inhabitants of the Atlantic Coast. One must only think back to Creole employment during US occupation of the Mosquitia as well as to the political influence of the Moravian church—which came to the Atlantic coast in the mid-19th century and emphasized Creoles’ British cultural heritage as a form of respectability politics, to understand why Creoles would be opposed to an anti-imperialist revolution. Additionally, Nicaragua’s economic downturn following the US sponsored anti-communist counter-revolutionary war against the Sandinistas as well as the US embargo placed on Nicaragua weakened Creoles’ economic position (Gabbert 2011:53). The reasons for the likening of the Sandinista Revolution to the overthrow of 1894 has to do primarily with the military occupation of the Atlantic coast for the recruiting of rebel Sandinista fighters, as well as with the fact that it brought a great number of Spanish speaking mestizos fleeing from danger in the capital to the coast (Decker and Keener 1998:9). Over all, the Sandinistas failed to understand

the unique history of the Atlantic coast, ultimately mirroring the sense of superiority and entitlement of mestizo Nicaraguans almost a century earlier.

Though the Nicaraguan state has historically viewed indigenous and Afro-descendent cultural and regional autonomy as a threat to its power and mestizo nationalist identity—often rooted in memories of Mosquitian nationalism (Goett 2004:7)—towards the end of the revolutionary era in 1987 the Sandinista state passed several important laws including the Autonomy Law and Law 445 which secured Afro-descendent and indigenous rights to land claims. The prime reason for the inclusion of a multiculturalist Autonomy Statute in the National Constitution was the protracted conflict between the Nicaraguan revolutionary government and indigenous groups on the Atlantic Coast in the 1980s. Thus, these rights were not merely handed over to coast populations—they were demanded.

Under the Autonomy Statute, Afro-descendent and indigenous peoples were to be recognized as distinct ethno-racial groups under the multiculturalist state model and to benefit from the implementation of bilingual programs in English, Miskitu, and Mayangna (Decker and Keener 1998:7). Although Afro-descendent and indigenous struggles have been able to secure some rights, the laws granted purportedly aim to combat ethnic discrimination yet do not explicitly address race or legacies of racial inequality in Nicaragua in paper or practice. Goett (2004) argues that following the Autonomy Statute, the state has continued to “privilege mestizo identity and culture as the defining characteristic of the Nicaraguan nation” (8), and has continued to write off Afro-descendant and indigenous groups as counter-national.

Additionally, although ethnic discrimination is part and parcel of race-based discrimination, efforts such as multicultural education, bilingual education, the defense of territorial rights, and even cultural revitalization programs do not necessarily redress

institutionalized anti-Black racism—which is often the problem with multicultural discourses. Mirna Cunningham Kain (2006), a Miskitu woman and indigenous rights organizer from Rio Coco, or Wangky River, Nicaragua, notes that the concept of multiculturalism in Nicaragua and elsewhere is flawed in that it fails to address the more structural manifestations of racism and power relations “that allow racist discrimination to continue even after it is made illegal on paper” (81). Kain advocates instead for interculturalism, a process of coexistence, sharing, exchanging, and mutually respecting. This failure to address structural anti-Black racism by the Nicaraguan state may be one factor influencing Creoles to positively identify as “Black Creole” in order to address both ethnic and racial distinction in their rights claims.

Hooker (2012) affirms that the emergence of a collective Black identity among Creoles in part consists of the “self-generated strategies for negotiating official multicultural models” (Hooker 278). Though the autonomy law has not been highly effective in combating anti-Black discrimination, Hooker analyzes the connections between the current emphasis on Blackness in conceptions of Creole identity and the changes to Nicaragua’s model of multiculturalism that begin to recognize the existence of ethno-racial hierarchy and attempt to implement policies to combat ethno-racial discrimination. She suggests that this link has to do with Creoles’ perception that claiming a Black identity in the face of anti-Black racism can help their situation under ongoing multicultural policy amendments of the Nicaraguan state, referring to it as an essential relationship between rights and racial identities. Coordinator of the Creole Organization of Nicaragua George Henriquez Cayasso affirms the importance of this essential relationship to Creoles during the 1980s:

“I believe the revolution was a time and a period that people had to unite theyself or suffer to be extinguished. It’s because of being in a peace period and having these bunch

of universities; I believe that is when people start to auto-identify theyself [as Black]. And again, these things were never taught in class.”

Here George is implying that a new wave of Black identification came about in the 1980s and 1990s primarily because of the new multicultural citizenship discourse and the resulting autonomy law which granted the autonomous Atlantic region the right to establish their own universities and education systems in the face of ethnic discrimination and anti-Black racism newly recognized by the state (Kain 2006: 82).

Given this rampant Black erasure and mestizo nationalism in Nicaragua, Hooker (2012) suggests that Creoles are beginning to imagine a collective Black transnational identity linking them to the Black diaspora and that Creoles utilize diasporic identification in order to find a language for the same kind of experiences that Blacks in the diaspora face around the globe (278). A connection to the Black diaspora is most likely pertinent given the global recognition of historical Black struggles such as the Civil Rights and Anti-Apartheid movements. If Creoles cannot mobilize under the Nicaraguan state as a distinct ethnic group *and* attain rights against anti-Black discrimination, and especially if Nicaragua continues to construct itself as an overwhelmingly mestizo nation and perpetuate Black erasure, Creoles will have little option but to draw on their membership as global Black citizens to mark themselves as a distinct minority group in Nicaragua and appeal to international human rights organizations for help. It is becoming increasingly clear that ethnic mobilization alone cannot grant Creoles the kind of anti-Black discrimination rights they are struggling for.

My own ethnographic research conducted over two months during the summer of 2014 has suggested that Creoles in Bluefields are already envisioning rights-based claims that take into account both racial and ethnic identity. Under Nicaraguan mestizo nationalism and the myth

of mestizaje, being Black is not enough to win both kinds of rights, and neither is being ethnically Creole. Mary Britton, a younger and lighter skinned Black-identifying Creole expressed in an interview that being Black is not about one's color as much as it is something one experiences internally as a member of the "Black ethnic group." Mary's commentary serves as an example of how Black racial identification in Bluefields is becoming synonymous with Creole culture which has previously been characterized as distinctly Anglo-Saxon (Baracco 2005). This synthesis of racial and ethnic identity suggests that Black Creoles in Bluefields are increasingly taking up Black identities in order to help mark themselves as a distinct racial and ethnic group in Nicaragua not only for rights under the multicultural citizenship regime but also as a form of cultural preservation given deep-rooted Nicaraguan structural racism.

Before further engaging a discussion on the impact of mestizo nationalism on Black identity formation in Bluefields, it is important to note the important contribution these findings make in regard to Hooker's (2012) evaluation of the identifiers "Black Creole" and "White Creole" as signifying a larger Creole cultural identity with a "subset" of Black identifying Creoles (274). Although this may be true for some lighter skinned Creoles, gathering from interviews with approximately 20 Creoles I would suggest that most Black-identifying Creoles (including both darker and lighter skinned Creoles) are imagining an inclusive Black Creole identity category in that they see all Creoles—as Afro-descendants—as falling under the Black Creole marker regardless of skin color. Similarly to Mary's eschewing of colorism in imagining a Black Creole identity above, Pastor Rayfield Hodgson commented that the division between 'Black' and 'white' Creole is outrageous because "Creole is Creole, and if you're Black you're Black; it doesn't matter the tone of your skin."

Rather than commenting on the divisions within Creole society, the primary division Rayfield alluded to was between Creoles and mestizos. After addressing the increasing rates of mestizo immigration Hodgson added that [mestizos] have recently been trying to identify as Creole. He explained that both incoming and older generations of mestizo immigrants are not only speaking Creole but are also petitioning for land claims based on their long-term occupation of Bluefields land. High school principal Graciela Brackett similarly expressed fear that Creole people and their culture might disappear due to the influx of mestizo immigration, while Veronica Johnson urged Black Creoles to get together as a strong community to practice their traditions and culture, “because that is what identifies [them] as Black people.” Despite increasing mestizo immigration and the historical legacies of mestizo nationalism such as enforced language policies and Black erasure in national curriculums, however, Creoles continue to positively identify as Black and take up the identifier “Black Creole” to claim a space within the multicultural rights regime. This suggests that Black Creole identity emerges in light of the continued reach of nationalist tentacles on the Atlantic coast. Interviewees primarily asserted that the influx of mestizos to the Atlantic coast has only strengthened their Black Creole identities.

Here it is important to return to the idea that Creoles have not always identified as Black in order to connect the colonial history of the Atlantic Coast and Nicaraguan mestizo nationalism to (disparate) Creole identity formation historically. Given the histories of Spanish and mestizo encroachment on the Atlantic coast it is no surprise that for generations Creoles used to demonstrate a strong Anglo-affinity and cultural politics, believing they were primarily English descended and thus especially distinguishable from other groups by their British cultural roots. This politics of siding with their British ancestry most likely also has origins in Creole subjection under British rule. As Gabbert’s (2011) path breaking analysis of early Atlantic Nicaraguan slave

societies demonstrates, Anglo-affinity among Creoles is deeply rooted in their quest for social and economic mobility during enslavement. According to Gabbert, slave status was correlated with African ancestry; thus, once free, both Blacks and “coloureds” attempted to “dissociate themselves both socially and culturally from their African heritage and to conform to the European standards imposed” (46). While striving for both social mobility and legal equality, freed slaves had little option but to emphasize both their white ancestry and their distance from those still enslaved. Commenting on the legacies of slavery and its influence on disparate Creole identification Ms Graciela Brackett notes:

Some [Creoles] don't want to say they're Black because they don't want to relate their self with that slavery life that we know in our ancestors' times there was slavery in Corn Island, and those people came to Bluefields like Black people. So then you say “I'm not Black because I wasn't a slave. I am a Creole because Creole people were not there in them time and they weren't slave.” So I feel like it's there where the idea come that some is Black and some is Creole. Some says yes, we understand that we were Black people, that we were slaves. But we feel good of being Black. We're not no more slaves. And we just feel good identifying ourself as Black people because it's part of our culture.

Ms. Graciela's observations regarding Creole identity formation gets to the crux of the long-term effects of colonialism and slavery on Nicaragua's Atlantic coast. Up to the present moment their legacies are impacting racial formations and raced self-making among Creoles who are struggling to distance themselves from the past of slavery and all the racialized notions, stereotypes, and social and living conditions set in place between the early 16th and mid-19th centuries in the Nicaraguan Mosquitia.

As Ms. Graciela's later comments about her own identification as Black demonstrates, however, the kind of anti-Black and Anglo-affinity identity politics historically taken up by Creoles should not preclude their identification as Black. Gordon (1998) engages the importance of political context in his historical discussion of Creole identity formation. Arguing that identity and

diasporic consciousness can shift over time according to the sociopolitical moment, Gordon provides a careful analysis of important political moments and Creole interpretations of those moments—such as the revolution and ensuing civil war—to explain that identity does not exist in a vacuum but is historically and epiphenomenally motivated. Following Gordon and Gabbert’s analysis, then, when Creoles have historically expressed sentiments of Anglo-affinity they were mostly tied to political and practical motivations—such as in the case of slavery until the mid-19th century, annexation in 1894, and the nationalist revolution in the 1970s and 1980s.

With that said, Creole identification as Black must also be understood in a socio-cultural context. Despite the dangers of a functional anthropological discourse, there is something to be said, for example, about the sustained prominence of Afro-Creole aesthetic and cultural practices such as gombay music production, the practice of obeah, and the Afro-Caribbean Maypole fertility celebration (Gabbert 2011:43; Moody-Freeman 2004). These ostensibly African “retentions” (Herskovits 1941) are thought to have strengthened with the mass immigration of working class West Indians during the late 18th and early 20th centuries (Gabbert 2011:59). My own ethnographic research conducted over a period of two months in 2014 with Bluefields residents of varying neighborhoods, social spheres, ages, genders, and class status points to the ways in which, in addition to Afro-Caribbean tradition, it is a deliberate Creole cultural politics that is responsible for these Afro-Caribbean “retentions” as Creoles articulate a transnational, trans-border Black identity more in favor of a raced cultural nationalism.

Recent scholarship on the postcolonial Caribbean suggests that it would be theoretically productive to consider the Caribbean as not yet post-national (Jobson 2011), but the history of the Mosquitia which situates Nicaragua’s Atlantic coast as a nation within a nation would be better conceptualized under Gilroy’s (2000) understanding of diasporic formations as in opposition to the

modern nation-state. Though Creoles on the coast have been organizing for ethno-racial rights in Nicaragua under bodies like the Black Creole Indigenous Communal Government in Bluefields, Nicaraguan anti-Black racism and mestizo nationalism has resulted not only in a process of Black Creole community building in Nicaragua but also in a process of Black Creole community building that includes Creoles in the diaspora and offers all Creoles access to a larger Afro-Caribbean and global Black diaspora. Ruminating on the connectedness of Black people globally Ms. Veronica explains, “We have that connection – no care where our Black people could be, in South Africa, North Africa, but what we have in common is our same thing, where so ever we go we have something in common: that identity, that communication.” Here Ms. Veronica may be speaking of literal communication between Black people in Central America and the African continent, but her meditation on the Black diaspora and commonality implies that it is a similarity in lived experience informing Black identification that also unites Black people globally.

Creole cultural politics in the current moment elucidates how, in Ms. Dolene Miller’s words, “[Creoles] identify with people from Africa, especially with the music from the Caribbean, and most of all, well, one Black identity.” Creole dominated locales along the coast such as Bluefields, Pearl Lagoon, and the offshore Corn Islands are still culturally rich with staple West Indian foods such as run dun, coconut rice and beans, Jamaican patties, and multiple cake varieties: coco cake, cassava cake, johnnycake, soda cake, and more. Throughout these coastal regions one can also find the musically rich traditions of Jamaica and Trinidad that Ms. Dolene speaks of, with reggae and soca heard playing from restaurants, homes, and vehicles on the road. This is not to say, however, that there is not a rich tradition of musical production among Creoles at home and abroad, given the prominence of several Creole music groups and musicians such as Soul Vibrations, Dimensión Costeña, Grupo Zinica, and Mango Ghost. Their work includes original productions as well as

renditions inspired by popular Caribbean music, particularly the works of reggae legends like Peter Tosh and Bob Marley. Musical production is one of the key mediums through which Creoles are articulating a Black diasporic politics.

What follows in Chapters one through three reflect online, social media, and ethnographic research with which I describe and theorize some of the ways in which Afro-Nicaraguan Creoles are (re)interpreting racialized interpellations of their identities (Allen 2011: 5) and utilizing Black diasporic politics in this era of increasing globalization. Here I am less interested in the break between Afrocentric and Black postmodernist thought as articulated by theorists like Molefi Kete Assante (1980) and Paul Gilroy (1993), respectively, than I am in the ways in which an aesthetic and cultural politics of Blackness are being deployed by Creoles in Bluefields.

In chapter one I explore music production among Creoles and the site of the sonic as a medium through which a claim to diasporic Blackness can be waged and which Creoles have been engaging with for some time. Chapter two considers the site of the visual and the works of two Creole women painters and their political engagements with constructing alternative images of Black womanhood in Nicaragua (White 2001; Morris 2010). The paintings of June Beer and Karen Spencer Downs are at once counter-discourses of Black womanhood as well as representations of Black women situated in both local and larger Afro-Caribbean communities and cultural contexts.

Chapter One:

Sounding Blackness: Creole Sound Systems and Sonic Politics

*Right on the edge of the Caribbean sea
So many miles away from Africa
Another branch of the same old tree
We're walking through the pages of our history
To find out where we are coming from"*
-Soul Vibrations, "Rock Down Central America"

In recent years Bluefields has been dubbed the "reggae capital" of Central America. Perhaps more important than discerning whether or not there is any truth to this declaration would be an evaluation of where the sentiment comes from and what is at stake for Bluefields and its Creole residents in the assertion. The undated flyer (Figure 1) advertising a fundraiser that would help build a recording studio and cultural center in Bluefields was found on the Facebook page for the Bluefields Sound System. In the fine print at the bottom the flyer highlights difficult histories in Bluefields having to do with the civil war of the 1980s, hurricane Joan in 1988, as well as "drugs and poverty." It also advertises an "exclusive" screening of Bluefields musical stars such as the more recent Kali Boom and Caribbean Taste, and the older Sabu and Philip Montalban Ellis. The intent of this poster is to cast Bluefields as a culturally and musically rich locale deserving of local and perhaps national and international recognition.

Receiving recognition locally and abroad for Bluefields music artists and cultural production is one of the main goals of the Bluefields Sound System, co-founded in 2005 by Americans AlexZander Scott and Edwin Reed-Sanchez who had initially come to Bluefields to make a documentary about Bluefields' unique culture (Bishop 2012). Finding themselves intrigued they decided to stay, and when they noticed that Bluefields youth and were not learning or passing

on the music and traditions of their elders they decided to intervene and create a non-profit recording studio for the preservation and promotion of indigenous and Afro-descendant music in Bluefields and the Caribbean coast more broadly. Part of the goal of Bluefields Sound System is also to promote local and international recognition of Bluefields musicians as well as provide educational workshops and multimedia production courses. Since their inauguration in 2005, the Bluefields Sound System has been able to open a multi-media resource center, manage workshops and courses, produce professional albums for Bluefields musicians, receive donations and expand their reach to the neighboring communities Pearl Lagoon and Corn Island.

In an interview with MTV Iggy, Bishop (2012) describes the extent to which Scott and Reed-Sanchez were invested in undoing processes of cultural erosion in Bluefields and bringing back traditional practices like May Pole music and the production of reggae, soca, and dancehall, as well as speaking more Creole rather than Spanish. To some degree, it seems that Scott and Reed-Sanchez initially had an objectifying expectation of a certain kind of tradition and folk practice exotic and interesting enough for a documentary. What their concerns about cultural erasure still capture, however, is the fraught history between the Creole and Atlantic Coast population and the Nicaraguan state that have led to a power politics and Hispanicization of the coast. Perhaps it was not that music and tradition were not being (re)produced in Bluefields: it just was not what Scott and Reed-Sanchez expected to find in an English-speaking Caribbean enclave. To some degree it was the founding of the Bluefields Sound System that really promoted the articulation of a “reggae capital” and an Afro-Caribbean identity in Bluefields, but it would be incorrect to say that this move had been unprecedented.

In the preface to a 1989 Greg Landau recording of Soul Vibrations’ reggae hit “Rock Down Central America,” Black Creole Nicaraguan Rayfield Hodgson refutes the erroneous yet popular

belief that Black people do not exist in Nicaragua. In a passionate and hopeful declaration he asserts that the event's recording and global circulation will inform the world that Black Nicaraguans do exist, "coming straight from Africa and singing to you with feelings." The video itself captures a quick shot of a banner that reads "Culture is autonomy – autonomy is revolution," and features a live concert performance of "Rock Down Central America" as well as glimpses of Black life in Bluefields: children playing in the streets, women dancing in a square, and dreadlocked men wearing Pan-African colored garb walking in town with over-the-shoulder boom boxes popular in 1980s era hip hop music videos.

The lyrically and visually deliberate Black aesthetics and peace politics featured in this reggae tune and accompanying video respond to the political strife and turmoil that plagued Nicaragua during the 1980s with lyrics like "...fighting for a cause he can't recall" and "...in this time of war and misery, we've got to lift our voices high and sing." The call to Blackness featured here is one that takes global or at least regional form yet reflects local conditions. The sound of "Rock Down Central America" is not much different from Jamaican roots reggae of the 1970s, but the song's content comes from the Creole experience of marginalization in Nicaragua, particularly during the civil war of the 1980s following the Sandinista Revolution. What critical work might a globally recognized form relaying such a message be engaging in? In the context of a civil war plagued era, it is likely not too much of a stretch to interpret Rayfield's distinguishing of Black Nicaraguans and call for the world to see what Black people live in Nicaragua as enacting a kind of political and national transcendence.

Comprised of front men Philip Montalban Ellis and Raymond Myers and seven other Creole band members from the Atlantic Coast, Soul Vibrations began making reggae music in the mid-to-late 1980s. Most of their songs referenced the hypocrisy and injustice surrounding politics

and political leaders in Nicaragua. In fact, Montalban was once imprisoned by the Sandinistas as well as the US backed counterrevolutionary Contra army. The political message in Soul Vibrations' songs is thus indeed related to the mestizo nationalism and anti-Black racism of the Nicaraguan state, but also to the exploitation of the Atlantic coast in the cultural arena.

In their song "I'm Black History," Soul Vibrations repeat "I said they're robbing, they're robbing my culture" several times, presumably referencing the cultural commodification and packaging of Creole culture—namely Creole music and traditional dance—for tourism, revenue, and nation-building by the Nicaraguan state. Every year during the month of May, the Creole festival Maypole transforms the city of Bluefields and other Creole towns along the coast into a colorful and vivid celebration with accompanying dance and music forms. This fertility celebration was arguably brought to Atlantic Nicaragua via British settlers in the 18th century, but has since been modified by Creoles, and is now thought to be a distinctly Afro-Nicaraguan and Jamaican tradition. In recent years the festival has been appropriated by the state, becoming a national "folkloric" Nicaraguan tradition rather than a regional tradition connected solely to Afro-Caribbean Creoles. Really the cultural appropriation began in the late 1980s during the beginning of multicultural discourses following the civil war when the new Sandinista government capitalized on "ethnic" tourism, drawing from the traditions of the coast to build a national folkloric, albeit commercialized, culture (Deerings Hodgson 2008: 14-15). Though drawing on the Creole cultural tradition of May Pole may have been an attempt to integrate the Atlantic Coast into Nicaragua's national identity in line with the anti-discrimination policies enacted by the autonomy laws and the new multicultural state model, the national adoption of May Pole has only further exploited and marginalized Creole populations living on the coast.

Recent ethnographic study on the May Pole festival holds that the national adoption of May Pole festivities by Nicaragua represents a shift from the ethnic mestizo nationalism characterizing the country up until the 1980s to a kind of “civic” nationalism in which national inclusion is based on civil rights and legally established criteria and procedures for minority groups (Fjærestad-Tollefsen 2012). The idea that a civic nationalism would mean that “all the ethnic groups are to be seen as Nicaraguan” (72) may seem to have validity if one considers the shift among mestizo Nicaraguans from racist discussion of the coast as inhabited by foreigners to a conversation that lauds its Afro-descended dance and music traditions. However, this inherently neoliberal multiculturalist notion fails to see that these discourses merely mask the prejudice and racial stereotypes held by non-Black Nicaraguans, now able to hide behind “compensatory” measures given to disadvantaged groups (Hale 2005: 12). The politics of civic nationalism or cultural recognition, though ostensibly marking a shift from the assimilationist national project of mestizaje, are really only the other side of a mestizo nationalist coin which works to remake racial hierarchy. The recent analysis of white ruling class appropriation of Black popular culture in the US and the ways in which this commercial exploitation serves to further exert hegemony over Black and marginalized groups in *Soul Thieves* (Kopano and Brown 2014) has resonances with the case in Nicaragua.

Hegemony over Black popular culture is global in reach and represents a colonial and imperialistic desire to have deeper knowledge about a more exotic, primitive, and “authentic” other. The objects, aesthetics, and traditions of marginalized people and sub-national minorities thus often translates to profits for the ruling group. Jocelyne Guilbault (2011) on multiculturalism in Trinidad and Tobago writes that one of the foremost problems of multiculturalism has to do with the power wielded by consumers since “in a capitalist neoliberal era, what sells acquires political

weight” (2). Here Guilbault is referring to the profitability of “diversity” as entertainment, specifically in regard to Carnival in Toronto. Additionally, Guilbault notes another problem that comes with multiculturalism is that the representation of minority cultures on national platforms and the acknowledgment of diverse groups is many times only for show, failing to address systemic inequality (3). Kymlicka’s (2012) analysis of the relationship between social capital, ethnic identities, and multicultural policies (MCPs) describes the defining feature of a neoliberal multiculturalism as “the belief that ethnic identities and attachments can be assets to market actors and... legitimately be supported by the neoliberal state” (109). He adds that ethnicity is a source of social capital and can thus enable successful market participation, and that one way governments can promote this market-enhancing capital is through the implementation of MCPs which seemingly treat minority ethnic groups as state partners (109-110).

In these discussions of the appeal of Black and minority cultures as market assets that can be marketed globally (such as music), it becomes increasingly clear that the goal of now popular neoliberal multiculturalism models is not redress for the structural inequality and disadvantaged positions facing minority groups or the cultivation of national citizens who care about inequality, but the ability of the Nicaraguan state to participate as a viable market actor among other nations. Additionally, as Guilbalt (2011) notes, this kind of neoliberal multiculturalism works to homogenize the appropriated culture as an end goal, resulting in a multicultural heterogeneity that re-inscribes a power dynamic trumping the actual content of culture by focusing on instrumentality and economic outcome.

In an interview featured on Youtube, a Creole woman regarded as the daughter of May Pole culture who goes by Puopo recounts:

When we used to be in culture we never had the support what culture havin now. That's why I say now everybody know culture now because culture have a budget. But when it was our culture, our culture was sweat. By the sweat of you brow, you get what you want. For instance, when I used to dance carnival my first sandal was out of cardboard. Now you have the opportunity to come Managua and choose what sandal you want and what price it is, and if you no get it you no dancing. But is one thing I have to say: when you really know what is culture and you love culture, you no have to depend on no government nor nobody to support you with nothing. You could do your own ting your way.

Puopo's comments highlight how what is perceived to be an "authentic" Creole Maypole culture is being stolen and diluted as the Nicaraguan state attempts to nationalize it as the folkloric culture of Nicaragua. Puopo understands this pillaging of Creole culture as a commercial enterprise intricately woven into the state's capitalist agenda. The fact that the May Pole celebration is now associated with a particular kind of sandal and attire also reveals the hegemonic nature of state appropriation of Creole culture. As emphasized by Puopo above, the culture that Creoles in Bluefields created over time was never associated with any kind of income or garb, just sweat and love. The sandals in Managua that she is referring to are not any Creole material production but the sandals made of "ethnic" fabric that have always been associated with indigenous culture, throughout Central and South America. In this fashion, there is also a conflation and erasure of Creole culture that comes with its appropriation by the Nicaraguan state.

Later in the interview Puopo urges Creoles to stake their grounds when it comes to May Pole and Creole culture at large:

Let's stop sell out the culture. Because that is what I see going on – our culture selling out. We is who create carnival, after Costa Rica. Bluefields, Nicaragua. And now when they goin celebrate Fiesta de Carnival, you have to come in the Pacific, Managua. Babosadas [nonsense]! That is babosadas [nonsense]. Do the thing how it have to do.

Puopo's call to action points to the ways in which the national appropriation and commodification of Creole culture has created rifts between Creoles, stemming in particular from

a kind of “giving in,” if you will, to the nationalist appropriation of Creole culture. In the interview Puopo references a number of Creole musicians who have seen widespread success in Nicaragua, expressing her anger that only a few music groups and musicians are credited with representing “true” Creole culture. Ms. Puopo’s issue here is not necessarily that these musicians are not really coast men or representative of Creole culture; rather, it is their marketability, national success, and thus association with national Nicaraguan music that is a problem given the antagonistic history and relationship between Creole people and the Nicaraguan state.

One of the first Maypole music groups of the coast which experienced local and national success coming up in the 1970s was Los Barbaros del Ritmo. As T. M. Scruggs (1999) notes in his essay on music and the construction of Nicaraguan national consciousness, giving themselves a Spanish name demonstrated their goal of crossing over to the Pacific region of Nicaragua and cultivating a mestizo audience (313). The title of Los Barbaros’ first album was also in Spanish, a translation of the English “May Pole” to “Palo de Mayo.” This process of naming along with their studio recordings in the Nicaraguan capital of Managua and urging of mestizo Nicaraguans to enjoy Palo de Mayo music as Nicaraguans reflect this Creole band’s goal of mainstream, national success. This was also the experience of popular Creole mento and May Pole bands like Grupo Zinica and Dimensión Costeña who rose to national fame in the 1980s. As Scruggs notes, these Creole music groups formed mostly in response to economic opportunities in Managua that could not be found on the coast (317). Though there is truth to Scruggs’ understanding that the incorporation of Creole music into national music and expressive culture formed a common musical bond and nationalist sentiment, this romantic reading misses the coinciding of national adoption of creole music with the implementation of multicultural policies and economic revenue. The gift kiosk at the Augusto C. Sandino International airport today is still replete with jewelry

made on the coast, Palo de Mayo souvenirs, and Dimensión Costeña albums, and most tourists visiting Nicaragua almost always make their way to the Corn Islands on the coast before heading back home—that is, if they did not already spend their full stay in the country there. Cultural capitalism and the instrumentalization of Creole culture in Nicaragua turns out to be just another side of a hegemonic assimilation coin. The state only looks to the coast for profit. It is important to note, however, that despite Creoles' participation in processes of national commodification for economic gain, the production of Palo de Mayo music and its success also brought joy to Creole musicians and audiences during times of war (Kinzer 1984).

Scruggs (1999) attributes the downfall of Nicaraguan nation building via the incorporation of Creole music into the national cultural sound and iconography to the US-backed military contra war in the 1980s which led to an economic downturn, and the further economic decline that came with the departure of the Sandinistas from power in 1990 (318). According to Scruggs the new government looks to the north for cultural orientation. Though Scruggs painted the end of the Nicaraguan state's attention to and cultural appropriation of Creole May Pole culture and music as a negative occurrence interrupting the imagining of one united Nicaragua, he made no mention of the incredible growth of Creole musical production on the Atlantic coast. Scruggs mentions the disbanding of Creole Palo de Mayo groups in the 1980s and ends on this note. However, given the wealth of Creole musical production since the 1980s and the lack of scholarship addressing it, a survey and analysis of recent Creole music both in aesthetic and political terms would be helpful in grasping Creoles' response to their situation and relationship with the Nicaraguan state.

Soul Vibrations is just one example of a group performing in the 1980s and 1990s who espoused the Black consciousness that the Bluefields Sound System is now known for promoting, and associated Bluefields' name with reggae music. In 2003 the groups disbanded and front men

Philip Montalban Ellis and Raymond Myers went on to begin their solo careers, achieving widespread success and recognition throughout Nicaragua and Central America, the US and Canada, and even Europe. Philip Montalban, for example, has gone on to produce five albums including “Liberation” in 1999, “Natural” in 2003, “Viva La Vida” in 2005, “Africa” in 2009, and “Evolution” in 2012. As can be gathered from his album titles he still has a commitment to Black diasporic politics in his musical production. In a *Los Angeles Times* (Roos 1994) article Raymond Myers talks about his life in the United States and the influence that reggae legends Marley and Tosh have had on his music. Central to Myers’ discussion of Afro-Caribbean music forms in particular is their power to alleviate stress and touch the soul in times of civil war and political strife. The continuity between both Philip Montalban and Raymond Myers’ political leanings in the 1980s until the present day reflects the very unique relationship between music and Black diasporic politics in relation to the Nicaraguan state.

Although the politics behind the emergence of the Bluefields Sound System was not unprecedented and represented by coast musicians like Soul Vibrations, the Bluefield Sound System still played an instrumental role in providing Creoles in Bluefields with the means to explore what it means to be Black and Creole in Nicaragua and produce Afro-Caribbean diasporic music like traditional May Pole, dancehall, and soca. The lack of “traditional” music and culture being produced and passed on to the youth noted by Scott and Reed-Sanchez upon arriving in Bluefields might have been true if one considers the lack of resources present in Bluefields at that time to record or reproduce music. Perhaps another implication their observations point to when they expected to find Black diasporic and Afro-Caribbean traditions and did not is that the project of mestizo nationalism and Hispanicization of the coast is fully at work. Though this last premise is hard to believe given the circulation of Afro-Caribbean music throughout the Anglophone

Caribbean including Bluefields, it does perhaps mark a fear that Creole culture will soon disappear that is present among sympathetic foreigners and Creoles alike:

What I am worried about is because Creole coming to be a minority now, it's decreasing. You know? Because now we have in first place the mestizos, in second the Miskitos and then the Creoles in third place. I would like to see Creole people increase...Because with the time, maybe, we can go getting smaller and smaller and we can even disappear. Because we see now that the Creoles they are marrying to Spaniard and then like the rest is going, disappearing, disappearing, and I would like to see we increase, not decrease, as a people (Interview with Graciela Brackett).

First Bluefields was just maybe four, five neighborhood. But now we have a lot of influence of migration, of people from the Pacific coming in. And little by little that have been plenty influence in our Black Creole community (Interview with Wade Hawkins).

And then again is what we call the whitening of a people and an ethnical cleansing. By erasing a collective memory of a people out of your history books, by stop showing them to our kids, by showing only negative images of them, you tend to whiten that people and you tend to have an ethnic systematical cleansing of that people (Interview with George Henriquez Cayasso).

The fear expressed by most of my Creole informants as exemplified above has to do with the erasure of Creole history and culture, and thus of the Creole people. The increased mestizo immigration to the coast and cultural influence that comes with this immigration is likened to complete and total erasure of what is seen as Creole and Afro-Caribbean culture. Though this fear is not informed by postmodern identity discourse which holds that cultures are not static but ever changing and evolving (Hall 1990), the response does come from empirical observations such as the widespread use of Spanish over Creole in Bluefields. Thus, the move towards cultural preservation enacted by the Bluefields Sound System and bolstered by Creoles who share similar sentiments about preserving tradition can be seen as a quest to perform a very specific kind of Afro-Caribbeanness that has always been seen as a threat by the Nicaraguan state. Rather than focus on the quest for authentic Creoleness among Creole cultural practitioners and whether or not such an enterprise can be achieved, a more theoretically productive reading of traditional Creole

performance might consider what is at stake in this kind of performance and what kind of Black diasporic politics are at play.

One Bluefields music group born out of the creative environment at the Bluefields Sound System studio engages in a different kind of Black diasporic politics as those of Soul Vibrations in the 1980s and 1990s. Known as the Run Dun Crew—“run dun” referring to the traditional coconut seafood stew of the Caribbean coast, this music group made up of local youth Kali Boom and Papa Bantam, and American house dj Evan Rhodes, associates more with the Afro-Caribbean music genres of soca and dancehall rather than roots reggae. For example, their 2012 album “Money Tough” features tracks with repetitive dancehall riddims with one to two note melody voiceovers by Papa Bantam and Kali Boom rather than melodies sung over extended chord progressions characteristic of reggae. Run Dun Crew distinguishes themselves from other dancehall artists by singing about hard times rather than lavish lifestyles. Despite their dancehall aesthetics, however, Papa Bantam, Kali Boom and other local youth are featured on a 2014 album “Maypole 2014” in which they recreate traditional May Pole songs such as “Tululu” by Dimensión Costeña and “Reedo” by Los Barbaros del Ritmo.

It seems that the tremendous effort being placed into reproducing a kind of authentic Afro-Caribbean Creole culture is a direct response to the perceived lack of Creole cultural survival and the increase of mestizo influence on The Atlantic coast. Nicaraguan Creoles have always been in communication with the West Indies and the larger Caribbean whether through travel or immigration, or the circulation of reggae, soca, and dancehall music (Gordon 1998). The fact that there has been a recent push to legitimize their Afro-Caribbean roots and culture does not necessarily signify a shift from this history of communication but instead is reflective of the effects of the white supremacist, mestizo nationalist Nicaraguan state. Creoles feel compelled to assert an

authentic and traditional Creoleness which secures their place in the Afro-Caribbean and larger Black diaspora not because of any sudden rupture or (dis)communication but because they have felt the influence of Nicaragua's mestizo nationalist tentacles for far too long.

In light of historic mestizo nationalism which has physically and ideologically encroached on the Atlantic coast of Nicaragua via colonial competition between the British and Spanish in the 17th century, military occupation and forced "reincorporation" in 1894, the imposition of Spanish policies since reincorporation, Black erasure in school curriculums, and the occupation of land, regional government and political positions by mestizos today, it comes as no surprise that Creoles in Nicaragua would increasingly be taking up a Black diasporic politics. In a country that has historically marginalized Creoles, attempted to erase their cultural history and identity, and cast them as foreigners because of their blackness (at the same time as hoping for inclusion of this population via Hispanicization), to reinterpret and claim this interpellated identity is to wage a Black diasporic politics and project of autonomy from the state. Creoles in Bluefields are showing strong commitments to diasporic consciousness, and an imagining of existence beyond legal multiculturalist and mestizo nationalist boundaries.

Chapter Two: (Re)Imagining Blackness:

Gendered Diasporic Politics in The Works of Two Creole Women Painters

The history of Nicaraguan mestizo nationalism and anti-Black racism discussed up to this point has manifested itself through mediums beyond physical displacement, policy implementation, and cultural commodification. This chapter considers the gendered forms of anti-Black racism historically reproduced by the Nicaraguan state, as well as mestizo artistic production which has worked to perpetuate sexist and racialized tropes about the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua. A discussion of these gendered forms of anti-Blackness via the state and mestizo cultural production will be engaged primarily through the works of two Creole women painters, the late June Beer and Karen Spencer Downs, which I believe represent the specific site of struggle facing Afro-descended women in Nicaragua in the contemporary moment.

More specifically this chapter aims to draw on previous works detailing the life and politics of June Beer, highlight their influence on Karen Spencer Downs, and suggest that rather than simply presenting a counter-hegemonic response to the Nicaraguan state and mestizo representations of the Atlantic coast, the artwork of June Beer and Karen Spencer Downs reaches beyond a politics social instrumentality and recognition towards a politics of autonomy and diasporic consciousness. This is to say that there is a distinct legacy of Black Creole women thinkers who have been engaging in a politics of autonomy from the Nicaraguan state and Black diasporic solidarity as early as the mid-20th century, if not sooner. Before engaging in a formal and aesthetic analysis of Beer and Spencer Downs' works, it is critical that the politics of their specific forms of representation be contextualized via a brief background on gendered racial violence in Nicaragua and a biographical account of the lives and influences of Beer and Spencer Downs.

Born in Bluefields in 1933, it was from 1956 onwards that the late June Beer dedicated herself to painting and documenting Black life in Bluefields and the broader Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua. Though she only took up painting in 1956 during her brief stay with an aunt in Los Angeles, from 1956 until the time of her death in 1986 Beer was able to create a vast archive of Black women's history and memory on the Nicaraguan Caribbean coast. Courtney Morris (2012) argues that it was Beer's birth to a well-to-do Creole family that would later enable her to defy community expectations such as marrying off at a young age and instead become an artist, frequent traveler, and supporter of the Sandinista Revolution. Implied here is the notion that Beer's distinct political commitments and feminist politics were aided by her class position and economic ability to become an artist and traveler.

Though Beer's comparatively elite status indeed came to have a bearing on the kind of career and politics she would later develop in her life, I would like to emphasize here that despite Beer's seemingly cosmopolitan lifestyle she remained committed to furthering a feminist project in her hometown and among its Black community. Just two years after having moved to Los Angeles Beer decided to return to Bluefields in 1956 to look after her first child whom she had left in her mother's care; however, this was also a highly productive time in Beer's career as an artist in which she would paint Creole men and women in Bluefields, often on their way home from the city center (LaDuke 1991:144). Were it not for Beer's economic hardship upon her return to Bluefields and her inability to sell her artwork to Bluefields residents, it is possible that Beer would have stayed at home rather than journeying to the Nicaraguan capital of Managua in 1969 to make a name for herself among the growing community of artists and intellectuals there (Morris:117). At the end of 1969 Beer once again returned to Bluefields and was able to sell her work to several art collectors before her next and final stay in Managua in 1971 and 1972 (144). These series of

migrations to Los Angeles, Managua, and back have led scholars to connect Beer's distinctive Black feminist politics and political allegiance to revolutionary nationalist politics with political exposure received abroad and in Managua. It is undeniable that traveling abroad to the United States likely influenced Beer in that she was able to understand how the oppressions she faced as a Black Nicaraguan woman intersected with the oppressions faced by Black men and women elsewhere—especially during the mid-50s when she had arrived in Los Angeles, and that traveling to Managua exposed her to the revolutionary politics of the FSLN.

Despite the critical importance of travel for Beer's political developments, however, this approach risks overlooking the kind of critical embodied feminist and anti-racist work being produced on Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast by Afro-Nicaraguan women who may have never traveled outside of their hometown. For example, it was from a young age that Beer took up reading rather than playing with other children due to asthma and begun to question gender norms and the expectations facing Black women on the Coast (LaDuke: 142). To relegate the development of Beer's political consciousness to her travel and experiences outside of Bluefields is to ignore the lived reality of Creole and Afro-descendant women in Nicaragua and their daily feminist, anti-racist struggles. In order to better comprehend Beer's embodied feminist, anti-racist practices it is key to first understand a broader history and context of anti-Black patriarchal violence and where she fits into this narrative.

In her seminal essay on Afro-Nicaraguan feminism, Courtney Morris (2010) highlights the ways in which the activist work Afro-Descended Nicaraguan women engage in with their land rights and cultural preservation struggles in the face of Nicaraguan projects of assimilation has often been overlooked as merely practical and not explicitly feminist. Furthermore, she argues that gender justice is often a fundamental principle of Afro-Nicaraguan women's broad-based racial

and economic justice organizing on the coast as these oppressions almost always intersect. Much of the scholarship on Nicaraguan feminism fails to discuss racial difference, which only reflects the myth of racial democracy in Nicaragua as well as the Nicaraguan state's failure to address and rectify gendered forms of violence against Afro-descendant and indigenous women. One of the most telling and oft-cited instances of race-based gender discrimination in Nicaragua occurred in 2009 at one of the most popular nightclubs in Managua. In February of 2009, Creole politician and deputy with the Central American Parliament Bridgette Budier was denied entry into El Chamán nightclub, only having attempted to enter the nightclub to follow up on allegations made by her daughter about being denied admission to popular nightclubs in Managua (Morris 2012:7). Upon Budier's decision to conduct an investigation into her own experiences at the nightclub as well as those of other Black men and women, El Chamán entered the spotlight of a national controversy and debate on race and racism in Nicaragua. For most Creoles this event did not present anything new, but it did mark the very first time that the Nicaraguan state conducted a criminal investigation on the premise of racial discrimination (Gobierno de Nicaragua 2008:12), despite the series of legislation passed in the 1980s to diminish the problem of racial discrimination.

In addition to her position as a political figure, Bridgette Budier's persistence with the El Chamán is just one example of Afro-Nicaraguan women's insistence on inserting a gendered analysis into social and governmental spaces that have historically overlooked the specific needs of women, black women in particular, and their communities. The El Chamán case was first and foremost understood as one of racial discrimination but Budier's experience as a Black woman who was dressed in a long formal gown and headwrap yet was denied access to El Chamán on the basis that she was not dressed properly (Pérez 2010) speaks to the ways in which racial discrimination is always gendered and gender discrimination always racialized.

One of the foremost struggles that Afro-descendent women in Nicaragua are facing, for example, is the ideological state-based reproduction of narratives of Black women's sexual deviance. A number of Black feminist scholars and cultural theorists have prompted us to consider the ways in which these kinds of circulating images and discourses structure the lives of Black women throughout the diaspora. In the specific case of Nicaragua, there are three key representations of Black women that are nationally circulated as outlined by Morris (2010): 1) Black women are hypersexual and thus always available; 2) Black women are national outsiders, never truly Nicaraguan; and 3) Black women are part and parcel of the criminality and lawlessness inherent to the Atlantic Coast (9). Though the latter two points are not always gender specific as they also reflect depictions of Creole men, the ways in which the foreign-ness and lawlessness of Coast inhabitants is constructed has its roots in colonial geographies as well as in the sexual exploitation of Black women historically.

As discussed in the introduction, the postcolonial narrative of racial democracy and mestizaje in Nicaragua resulted in processes of spatial racialization that would assert the belonging and non-Blackness of 'mestizo' citizens and cast Nicaraguans on the Atlantic coast as Black and foreign. Underscoring this narrative of difference are notions of immorality and deviance—particularly sexual deviance which is always necessarily gendered. The discourse on Black hypersexuality does not exclude Black men, but there is a particular history of geographic representation utilizing the trope of the sexually deviant Black woman (Mohammed 2007; Gilliam and Gilliam 1999; Kutzinski 1993). Indeed it is the mestizo figure that has come to represent Nicaragua and most, if not all, Central and South American nations with the exception of Brazil; however, specific to the Caribbean, with the exception of the Francophone Caribbean, is the trope of the Mulatto woman as a symbol of national identity. In Richard Parker's (1991) analysis of

sexual culture in contemporary Brazil, he hones in on the ways in which the figure of the mulata emerges as a concrete symbol of carnaval and “becomes a representation of Brazil itself” (153). From her initial associations with sexual exploitation in slave societies, the mulata is newly configured as a marketing tactic under contemporary capitalism. While in the case of Brazil the image of the mulata becomes inextricable from carnaval in the social imaginary, in Cuba the mulata is likewise a sexual commodity that has been carefully woven into different modes of representation such as literature, poetry, and famously in tobacco ads (Medrano 1999; Kutzinski 1993). Though the image and symbol of the mulata is more readily associated with and representative of certain Caribbean nations’ national identity, this is not to say that Central and South American nations have not assessed the mulata figure in their respective contexts.

While in Latin America and the Caribbean more broadly the term “mestizo” has historically been constructed to conjure a ‘mixture’ between the European and Native American, the term “mulatto” was reserved for those of mixed European and African ancestry. In the case of Nicaragua and other Central American nations, their postcolonial processes of state and national identity formation privileged the category of the mestizo to ‘whiten’ the nation. In this process of mestizo characterization and national representation the Nicaraguan state virtually ignored Afro-descendant Nicaraguans on the Pacific, failing to use even the category of the mulatto. However, due to the historical formations on the geographically isolated Atlantic coast, Nicaragua would have to eventually confront its Mulatto, or “Creole,” population after the annexation of the Atlantic coast in 1894.

Critical Caribbean studies on processes of creolization in Latin America and the Caribbean highlight the ways in which the term “Creole” (“Criollo” in Spanish) was originally used to designate ‘old world’ European descendants born in the Caribbean, but eventually began to refer

to the racialized identities of African and European descended mulatto populations in their formerly colonized Caribbean locales (Lionnet 2014:1; Bolland 2006:7). Nigel Bolland writes about certain parts of the Caribbean, like the Caribbean coast of Central America, in which “Creole” specifically refers to Afro-descendants unless qualified by “white” (7). He adds that in this specific region of the Caribbean, “to be Creole means *not* to be Mestizo, Maya, or Garifuna, because the Creoles, unlike the others, are chiefly black, Creole-speaking and Protestant” (7, author’s emphasis). Bolland’s dialectical understanding of Creole identity in the Central American Caribbean in particular aptly reflects not only the historical processes of a dually colonized region but the internal colonialism and fraught relations within Nicaragua specifically. Though the Nicaraguan state was able to successfully promote the myth of mestizaje and racial democracy and ignore Afro-descendant populations in the Pacific, after the annexation of the Atlantic Coast the state was faced with its new Black/Creole/mulatto problem.

Beyond the internal colonizing and Hispanicization tactics discussed in the introduction and akin to the commodification of Creole cultural expression highlighted in chapter one, a tactic employed by the Nicaraguan state to deal with the problem of its Black coast population was to profit off of the sexualization of Creole and Afro-descendant coast women, effectively constructing a marketable image of the Atlantic coast as a wild, unruly, and hypersexual backwater region of Nicaragua known for its foreign blackness and immorality. This image of foreignness and lawlessness is always undergirded by the perceived hypersexuality of the Black Creole woman, speaking to the ways in which racialized perceptions of the coast as a deviant space are necessarily gendered. Though this image propagated by the Nicaraguan state has its roots in the historical sexualization and exploitation of Black women during slavery and colonialism, it has also accomplished two deliberate primary goals: 1) the state is able to mark the Atlantic coast as a

backwards and Black foreign space that is simultaneously part and not part of the Nicaraguan nation, and 2) the state is then able to profit off of this image of the coast as an exotic Black space and hidden paradise with hypersexual women and erotic festival and dance, ready to be explored and colonized all over again.

The kind of celebration of the Atlantic Coast on the part of the state or mestizos in the Pacific should not be confused for anything other than the re-inscription of “unequal material relations of power that (re)produce... racial and gendered subordination” (Morris 2012:74). The celebration of Creole culture and sexualization of Creole women may seem to represent moments of “acceptable blackness,” but it is only acceptable in so far as it re-inscribes Creole subordination and mestizo superiority. Though mestizo representations of the Atlantic coast and sexualization of Creole women attracts thousands of tourists annually in turn generating millions in tourism revenue, the long-term effects of mestizo patriarchal anti-Black racism are felt more strongly at the hands of mestizo men and women when Creole women venture into the Pacific region. Morris (2012) recounts Creole women’s narratives of patriarchal anti-Black racism in the Pacific in which they are often mistaken for prostitutes, propositioned by taxi drivers, and “subjected to crude sexual harassment by their male colleagues hoping to *conquistar* a Black woman” (72, author’s emphasis). Perhaps one of the most public instances of mestizo patriarchal anti-Black racism occurred on February 27, 2010 when Scharllette Allen Moses became the first Black woman and Costeña to be crowned Miss Nicaragua in the national beauty pageant.

While Allen’s election brought a sense of pride and hope to Creoles who for so long had watched Black Costeñas compete in the pageant only to get shot down year after year, critiques from mestizo Nicaraguans revived old tropes about the origin of Blackness as emanating from outside Nicaragua when they insisted that because Allen did not fall within the boundaries of the

mestizo nation she was incapable of representing Nicaragua to the rest of the world (Morris 2012:89). This ideology harkens back to theories of the specialization of race in Nicaragua in which Blackness is relegated to the Caribbean coast (even contemporaneously when mestizos make up the largest ethnic group along the coast) and is seen as outside the project of mestizaje. These notions of mestizaje also speak to the specific ways in which the project of mestizaje in Nicaragua and Latin America more broadly is predicated on the very absence of Blackness from the mestizo equation. The significance of a sexualized national beauty pageant lies specifically in its reflection of the contested terrain of national identity and representation. Contestants are expected to embody the nation, including its heteronormative, patriarchal, and anti-Black notions of beauty and femininity.

A brief survey of video comments in response to several interviews with Allen featured on YouTube reveals the ways in which she inhabits a fraught space for many mestizo Nicaraguans in which she is at times seen as a sexually desirable Creole woman and at other times as an overly masculine Black woman unrepresentative of the delicate, slim beauty of former mestiza candidates. One commenter presents both of these views simultaneously in a comment that refers to her as ugly yet sexually desirable: “She’s very burnt, very Black, but good tits” (author’s translation). Another commenter wrote, “She’s nice, the problem is that she’s black.” Both these comments embody the desire for all that Black women represent in terms of their “hypersexuality” and “licentiousness,” minus their actual blackness. In other words, both these comments speak to the historical formation of Black fungibility, particularly of the Black woman. Another commenter writes, “This isn’t a women’s competition? What is a Black man with a wig doing there?” (author’s translation). Morris (2012) aptly captures how these comments reveal the intricate ways in which Mestizo patriarchy, heterosexism, and anti-Black racism intersect in Nicaragua and structure the

lives of Black coast women (94). The comments about Allen and Black women from the Atlantic coast along with the anecdotes shared by Creole women on their experiences in the Pacific region of the country are not a few isolated instances but representations of the ways in which anti-Black racism in Nicaragua is undeniably gendered.

These patriarchal anti-Black sentiments are not limited to online web forums or YouTube comments; in fact, they reach as far back as early 20th century travel narratives (Gordon 1998) as well as in art representation such as in the poetry of the esteemed Nicaraguan poets Rubén Darío and Manolo Cuadra (Morris 2012). Citing a poem by each poet, Morris illuminates early mestizo representations of the Atlantic coast and Creole women as exotic, tropical treasures and “sexualized, savage bodies” (102). In Darío’s “Black Dominga” (1892) he reflects on the image of Black Dominga as a wild and lustful Black woman with an insatiable desire for Spanish, while Cuadra’s in his “Unico poema del mar” (1937) recollects a past experience with a “mulata muse” in Corn Island who, like Dominga, requires a Spanish lover to “fulfill the urgent needs of her black blood.” These early poems by mestizo poets demonstrate the centrality of Black Creole women in depictions of a wild and unruly Atlantic coast separate from the mestizo nation yet exploitable in more ways than one.

In fact, a parallel can be drawn between the sexual violation and exploitation of Black women in Nicaragua to the physical, social, economic, and ideological infringement on the Caribbean coast. Additionally, the racist patriarchal ways in which mestizo depictions of the coast and Creole women reify age-old notions of Black hypersexuality, backwardness and inferiority work to cement structural inequalities in the everyday lives of Creole and Afro-descended women from the coast. The sexual harassment Creole women face in the Pacific region of Nicaragua is only one example of a material effect of many, including the lack of justice—or even recognition—

achieved for Black women (in favor of white and mestiza women) who are victims of domestic abuse and sexual assault (Woods 2005).

Returning to the anti-racist feminist politics and praxis of June Beer, it is critical to understand her and her work as critically engaged with these historical and widespread forms of anti-Black patriarchal violence in Nicaragua. It is not until relatively recently that June Beer and her artwork have been seriously considered as Black and feminist rather than merely folkloric and provincial. Betty LaDuke's (1991) profile on June Beer and the third chapter in Courtney Morris' (2012) dissertation are two works that have noted the lack of scholarship on June Beer as an important Black feminist figure and activist and have set out to correct this gap by documenting the life of June Beer and the critical work she produced through her paintings. While LaDuke's feature story on Beer, "June Beer: An Artist of New Nicaragua" documents Beer's travels to the US, her start as a painter, and her political allegiances throughout the rest of her life as an artist, Morris' chapter "Engendering Possibility: Creole Women's Geographies in the Revolutionary Art of June Beer" draws on LaDuke's formative archive and further teases out the ways in which Beer's private life and paintings presented a unique Black feminist perspective as well as a response to gendered forms of state violence and anti-Black racism in Nicaragua.

In addition to the anti-Black patriarchal violence Beer is described as having faced while abroad in Managua working alongside painters and intellectuals of the Grupo Praxis collective, Beer also endured the machismo, or male dominance, of her alcoholic mestizo husband Pablo Largaespada (Morris 2012:138). Beyond his lack of support and inability to provide for his family, Largaespada was not encouraging of Beer's interest in art and actively discouraged her painting (LaDuke 144); however, despite Beer's frustrations with her marriage, she had little option but to continue working and supporting her family and did not dream that she would ever be able to

support her family via the income generated by her craft. As the years went by and Beer had more children with Largaespada she became increasingly vocal about her dissatisfaction with patriarchal machista culture in Nicaragua. Beer's 1970 painting *The Funeral of Machismo* captures the plight of women in the struggle against machismo:

While the form of a proud, beautiful rooster dominates the canvas, painted above it is a horizon line upon which a child, a young woman, a pregnant woman, and a grandmother are standing, all shaking their fists at the rooster (LaDuke 1991: 145).

Depicted in this painting is what Morris aptly titles a “multigenerational women’s struggle to dismantle [an] unequal social order” (145). Highlighted in the painting is the ways in which machista culture is structural in nature, getting passed down by generation and affecting all generations of women. Commenting on her painting in an interview with LaDuke Beer reflected, “Even if you’re a doctor, lawyer, or teacher, when you come home from your job, you work at home while your husband sits down. He sits and watches you work” (145). Beer’s frustrations with male dominance highlight the ways in which machismo and patriarchal violence are widespread and systemic, working irrespective of class. Beer’s early gender and class-based analysis of machismo culture necessarily takes an embodied perspective of race into account as she was a Black woman in a relationship with a mestizo man. Additionally, given her racialized experiences in Managua among some of the upper class artists and intellectual painters of the country, it is highly likely that Beer came to the realization that race also matters in the equation. If mestiza women were victims of a patriarchal order, Black women in Nicaragua felt the double sting of a raced *and* gendered experience of mestizo patriarchal violence.

It was in 1969 that Beer would decide to seriously dedicate herself to painting and make her first move to Managua after advice from a Dutch ship captain who was also a painter and urged her not to wait until her children were done with school (LaDuke 144). Though Beer returned back

to Bluefields by the end of that year, she decided to make one last return to Managua during 1971 and 1972 where she would begin working with professional artists associated with the Praxis Cooperative Gallery until the gallery was destroyed by a massive earthquake in December of 1972 (Morris 152). It was during Beer's time in Managua that her political sensibilities and anti-Somoza sentiments would crystallize. Because she was in the heartland of FSLN organizing and was working among some of the foremost Sandinista-supporting intellectuals of the time, it is only reasonable that a Black woman from the coast subject to economic struggle and a limited sense of economic mobility would come to support the ideology of armed struggle and resistance characterizing the socialist FSLN. She came to share the view of the Praxis artists that art was a key medium through which one's politics and critique of the state could be waged (Morris 2012:160).

Beer's newfound political consciousness, however, meant that she would soon be a target of Somoza's National Guard along with her peers in Managua. In an interview with Beer, LaDuke learns of an event that transpired in 1971 where the National Guard broke into the Praxis studio looking for any anti-Somoza political activities (LaDuke 1991:145). As Morris (2012) notes, this was not the first time Beer had been terrorized by the National Guard: according to Beer's son, Camilo Largaespada Beer, she had been targeted once before for standing up for her rights and had been raped while detained by the National Guard (161). Morris adds that Beer's experience of sexual violence places her within a long history of female Sandinista militants who has also been raped at the hands of the National Guard for their political activism. Beer's experiences of sexual violence at the hands of the state, coupled with her embodied knowledge and experiences of gendered violence back home, likely furthered her radical gender politics and keen insight on the

ways that the patriarchal power of the state must be read through a gendered lens in order to understand the subordination that women face in Nicaragua.

Beer would come to understand the ways in which the patriarchal violence of the mestizo state is also raced after certain experiences in the bohemian art spaces dominated in large part by mestizo men. Morris highlights the fact that Beer came to see her beauty as a curse after her experiences, and that though her looks had opened certain doors for her in Managua in terms of cultural and political spaces it had also meant that she would not be taken seriously by her male mestizo peers “often more interested in getting her into bed than developing meaningful relationships as fellow artists” (Morris 2012:163). Beer’s account here is consistent with a longer history of mestizo exotification and sexualization of Black coast women. The poem “June Beer de Bluefields” by Nicaraguan historian and literary critic Jorge Eduardo Arellano, for example, reads as a love letter reducing Beer to her racialized body and sexuality. The first passage reads:

Like Don Jose in the little port of San Carlos, Quico in his mansion, Omar in his studio in Barrio San Sebastián and many other poets and painters, I loved June, June Beer. And not only her fiery, Black serpent’s body, but her magnificent, magnetic soul, full of Atlantic tenderness. (Arellano 1994:147; Morris 2012:164).

Arellano in his poem speaks not only for his own racialized view of Beer and coast women’s femininity and sexuality but for the myriad of other artists who equally saw Beer as an exotic and sexually desirable object. What Morris terms “literary negrophilia” in her comparison between Arellano’s words and those of Ruben Darío in his poem “Black Dominga” aptly describes the long tradition in Nicaraguan cultural production of marking the Atlantic coast as a wild and unruly Black space that is close to nature, “highly sexualized, and perpetually foreign” (Morris 165). Beer could not simply be seen as a Creole painter from the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua; historical representations of the Atlantic Coast follow Creole women at all times through all of the spaces

they traverse in Nicaragua. Beer's racialized and gendered experiences in the Pacific region along with her experiences as a Black woman in Bluefields economically struggling to support herself and her family are undoubtedly reflected in many of her paintings.

In her 1984 painting "Fruit Vendors" (Figure 2), for instance, Beer depicts two Black female fruit vendors socializing while selling fruits likely in the city center. This piece reflects a period in Beer's career in which she focused primarily on portraiture and depictions of Black coast women. Morris (2012) argues that this turn in her work reflects her own experience of racist discourses of Black femininity in Nicaragua and functions as a counter-hegemonic mode of representation (167). In order to challenge the sexualized representations of Creole women by the Nicaraguan state and mestizo patriarchal cultural production, "Fruit Vendors" presents a close up of the intimate space between two seemingly young laboring women and bears witness to the friendships and connections built between Creole women on the coast as they labor to support their families. This notion of friendship between Black coast women actively challenges the image of a lustful and licentious Creole woman who longs for Spanish/mestizo men as it centers Creole women's methods of survival. Considering Beer's position as the primary provider in her family we can read the painting as reflecting her own subject position and gain insight into the ways in which Beer saw the connection between Creole women workers as necessary for strength and vitality under an anti-Black patriarchal state. Beer's turn to portraiture over landscape also reflects the ways in which she wished to counter representations of Creole women as objects and instead depict them as human beings with complex and multi-faceted lives.

One recurring image in Beer's portrait paintings shortly after her time spent in Managua is the figure of the mother and child. Two of her paintings are titled "Mother and Child" (Figures 3 and 4) and depict a mother with child in lap in a domestic setting, both with a window providing

a view of the animals and landscape outside. Beer's 1984 painting "Godmother and twins" (Figure 5) does not feature a godmother rather than a biological one, but the themes of Black motherhood, womanhood, and intergenerational connection are still present. Given Beer's focus on Creole women and the lack of men or the father figure in these paintings, it could be assumed that the women are single parent figures. While Morris (2012) picks up on the lighter skinned complexions of the children in Beer's work and suggests these three paintings represent both skin color politics in Creole society and her very personal struggle as a single mother supporting her children and mestizo husband who suffers from alcoholism, I would like to point out the critical theme of intergenerational feminism.

Beer's embodied experience of anti-Black racism and patriarchal violence in Nicaragua equipped her with a keen insight into the ways that patriarchy and anti-Black racism intersect in Nicaragua and have a concrete effect on Creole women. Given Beer's Black feminist and socialist sensibilities it made sense that when her daughter Natalia would want to join the Sandinista guerillas after their 1979 triumph that Beer would support her endeavors. Before her daughter left, however, Beer made sure to warn Natalia of "male opportunists who, instead of leading you to guerillas, take girls into the bush and take advantage of them" (LaDuke 1985:146). This intergenerational advice passed down from mother to child reflects the embodied forms of knowledge that Creole mothers pass onto their children in order to survive in a patriarchal and anti-Black state. It is this intergenerational dialogue and Black feminist precedent set by June Beer that I would like to focus on in my discussion of contemporary Creole artist Karen Spencer Downs.

Corn Island born Bluefields artist Karen Spencer Downs is perhaps the second most acclaimed artist and painter from the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua next to June Beer. It is perhaps no surprise that Downs was inspired by Beer's work given that they were neighbors in the Pointeen

barrio of Bluefields while Downs was growing up in the 1970s and 1980s. According to Downs, she received her very first set of coloring pencils from Beer and would often visit and mess around with her paint supplies. It was only after Beer's passing in 1986 that Downs inherited her paints and brushes and seriously began to paint; acquiring art materials was very difficult in Bluefields and required a trip to Managua. Today, Downs still keeps and paints with one of the brushes from Beer's collection.

Similarly to Beer, Downs' painting style is self-characterized as "primitivist," a famous school of painting originating in Nicaragua known largely for its focus on landscapes and the environment. As in Beer's artwork, an added element to Downs' primitivist style is a focus on portraiture, specifically of Black women from the coast. Her focus on women and Black women in particular stems both from her own experiences as a Creole woman in Nicaragua as well as aesthetic preferences: "Mostly I paint women... because I am a woman and we is stronger in all ways—maybe they have muscles but we stronger—and well,...every time I paint a man he looks ugly" (Interview with Monica Taylor, August 2014). Downs also reflected on her choice to paint Black women in particular because she identifies as a Black Creole woman even though her father was a white Texan, and because she grew up seeing Black women in her family and in her predominantly Black neighborhood.

Though Downs' approach to painting in which she paints what she finds aesthetically pleasing may seem apolitical at first, via the feminist adage of the personal as political I would like to argue here that representation is always already political. Several of June Beer's early paintings were self-portraits in which she would turn her artist's gaze onto her subject position as a Black woman. Morris (2012) argues that this process of self-painting and self-making "provided a space to reflect on her own experience, identity, and self-perception without being interrupted

by an external gaze” (130). Given the historical context of the racist patriarchal representations of Black women in Nicaragua and Beer’s personal experiences, it comes as no surprise that her artwork would reflect these experiences and those of women like her, as well as present counter-hegemonic representations of Black women.

One painting in particular (Figure 6) works as a counter-hegemonic representation in that it presents a self-loving Creole woman. In this depiction she is “of nature,” which is how Black women in Nicaragua have been depicted historically; however, in Downs’ work these women are not depicted as licentious, lustful, and hypersexual but as confident women who are happy with themselves and just as beautiful as the landscape. Here Downs is free to construct the women Black women of her community as she wants, salvaging both the beauty of the women themselves and of the landscapes that have for centuries been cast as wild, dirty and unruly. In the portrait of a Creole woman’s profile (Figure 7) Downs depicts the head (and hair) of a Creole woman as the shape of the Nicaraguan nation. This depiction can be read as challenging the racist logic and discourse of the state in many ways, the most obvious of which is that although Black men, Black women and the Atlantic coast are pathologized and perpetually read as foreign, here they are acknowledged as having been central to the development of the nation.

Although Downs’ works can indeed be read as counter-hegemonic representations via painting and the arts, her aims do not stop at a mere politics of correction or recognition even as her works engage with the state. Several of her paintings depict some of the very notions about Black coast women found in early Nicaraguan mestizo cultural production. Featured in one painting in particular (Figure 8) are three Black women undeniably linked to the Atlantic coast who are beautiful, curvaceous, and confident. This piece, along with similar works produced by June Beer, helps demonstrate the extent to which both of these Creole women artists are less

interested in any kind of respectability politics than they are in the autonomous processes of self-depiction, self-love, and self-celebration. Moreover, what is also at play in the celebratory works of June Beer and Karen Spencer Downs is a diasporic cultural politics claiming solidarity with and allegiance to the Caribbean. The aesthetics deployed by both artists from traditional Caribbean wooden abodes, lush tropical settings, hair wraps, and Pan-African colors (Figure 9) marks the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua as different from the mestizo-signified nation and as in conversation not only with the Caribbean as per its history but also Black people in the global Black diaspora. Artists like Beer and Downs are imagining what a politics of autonomy beyond the nation state in solidarity with other Black diasporic peoples might look like in the face rampant mestizo nationalism. This is a critical intervention especially given the erasure of Black women's roles in diasporic cultural and political movements.

Coda: Towards an Aesthetic Analysis of Black Diasporic Politics

Although Creole organizers and communal government leaders have engaged with the state in order to secure certain rights within Nicaragua, as the material effects of mestizo nationalism are felt more and more along the Atlantic Coast, Creoles are not only asserting strong Black diasporic identities—and Black Caribbean diasporic politics in particular—via the methods of civil society, but also through an explicit aesthetic politics of diasporic Blackness. What the sonic politics of Creoles producing Caribbean music forms such as reggae, dancehall and soca and the artworks of Creole women painters like June Beer and Karen Spencer Downs gesture towards is a kind of raced, gendered, and class analysis of state power and patriarchal anti-Black racism in Nicaragua. Moreover, sonic and visual aesthetics present a radical Black politics less concerned with engaging the state on their terms and more interested in a global Black diasporic citizenship

in which Blackness and Black womanhood are redefined autonomously. Aesthetics here are key in that they elucidate not only a politics of the everyday as devised by Creoles who don't wield "legitimate" political power, but also a kind of communal, non-governmental form of politics impermeable by the state. The power of aesthetics is precisely that it is fugitive. Creole sonic and visual production represent a new terrain to wage a Black diasporic politics; a terrain in which the patriarchal anti-Black state remains the target of critique but ultimately becomes irrelevant. As long as one is Black in Nicaragua one is not of the state, but of a larger African and Black diaspora in which there is space to imagine self-hood and practice self-love on one's own terms.

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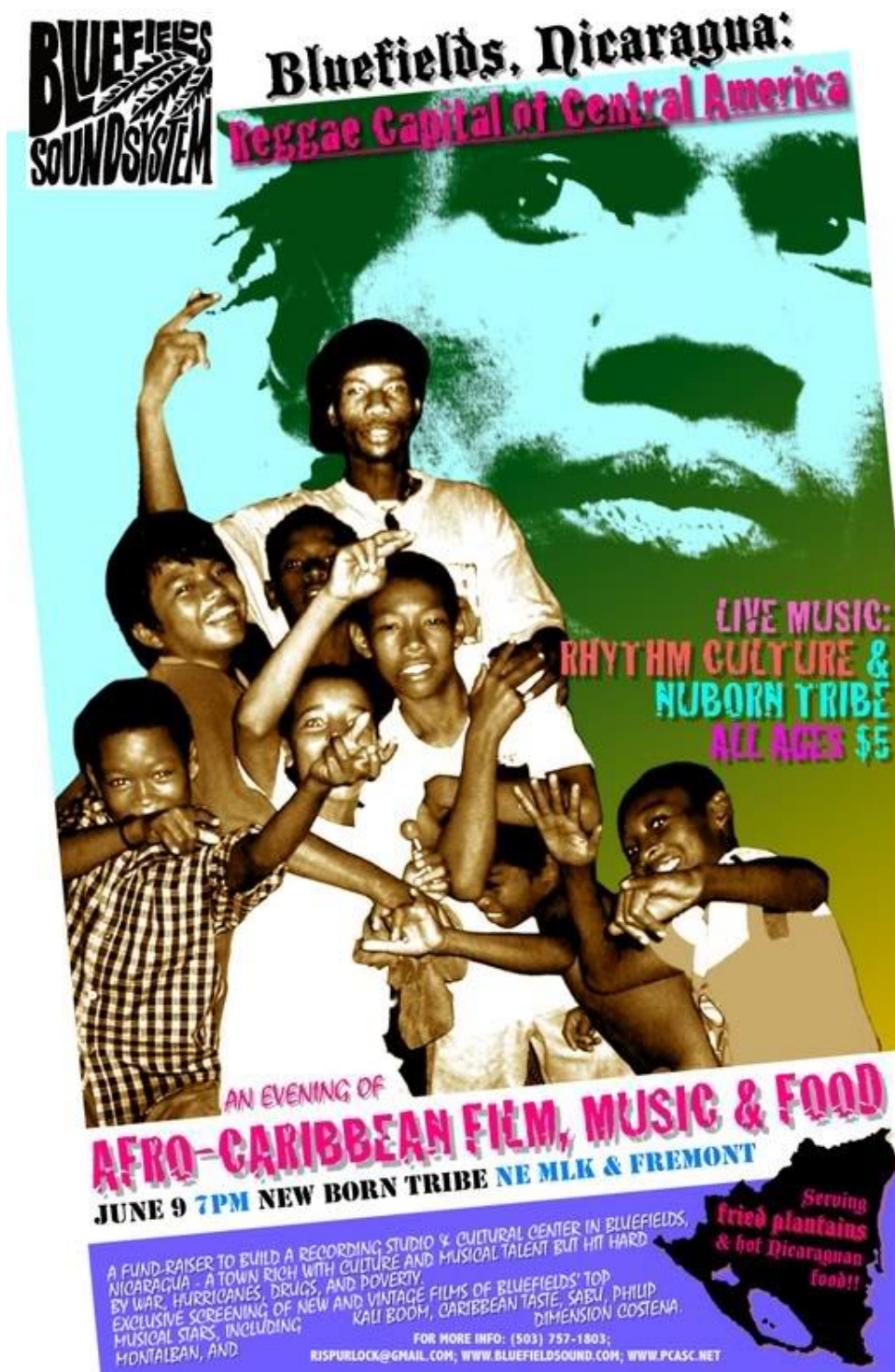


Figure 1

Bluefields Sound System Fundraiser Flyer.
Photo obtained from Bluefields Sound System Facebook page.



Figure 2

Fruit Vendors, 1984. June Beer.
Photo scanned from LaDuke (1991).



Figure 3

Mother and Child, 1978. June Beer.
Photo obtained from Morris (2012).



Figure 4

Mother and Child, 1982. June Beer.
Photo obtained from Morris (2012).



Figure 5

Godmother and twins, 1984. June Beer.
Photo obtained from Morris (2012).



Figure 6

Untitled, 2014. Karen Spencer Downs.
Photo obtained from Karen Spencer Down's Facebook page.



Figure 7

Untitled, 2014. Karen Spencer Downs.
Photo obtained from Karen Spencer Down's Facebook page.

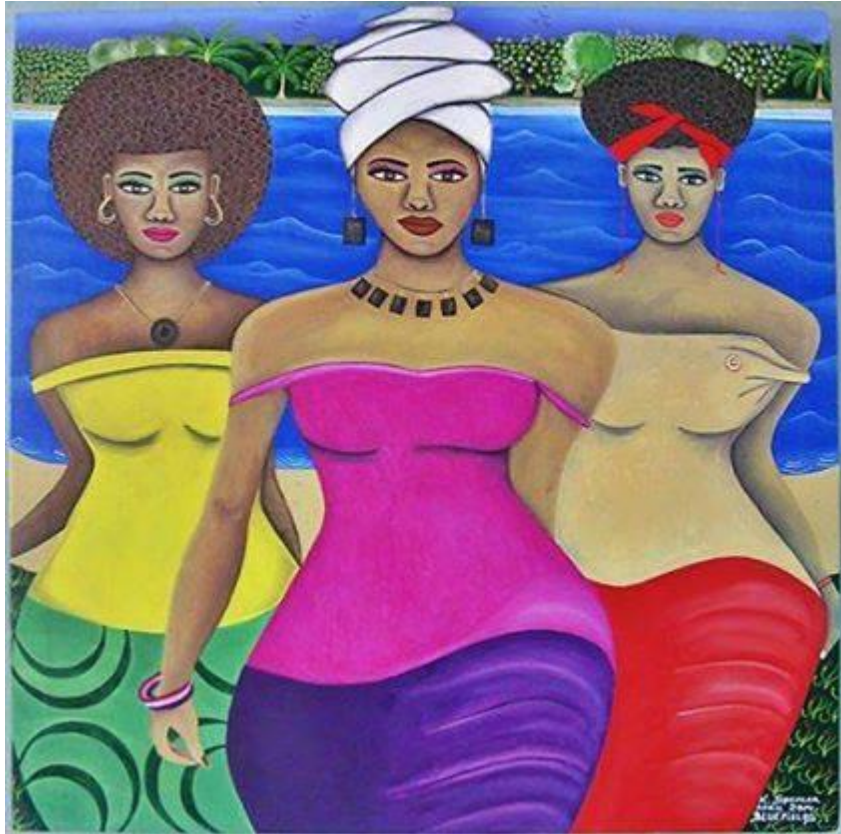


Figure 8

Untitled, 2014. Karen Spencer Downs.
Photo obtained from Karen Spencer Down's Facebook page.



Figure 9

Untitled, 2014. Karen Spencer Downs.
Photo obtained from Karen Spencer Down's Facebook page.