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# 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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*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  
'Cause if your plexion high, high, high  
If your complexion low, low, low  
And if your plexion in between, 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, and has made its way across the Caribbean and into the diasporic imaginary of Creoles<sup>1</sup> in Bluefields, a seemingly West Indian, English-speaking<sup>2</sup> enclave on the southern Caribbean coast of Nicaragua.

In recent decades, it has become increasingly clear that Black and Afro-descendent struggles are continuously being taken up from a position of diasporic consciousness.<sup>3</sup> The power, for example, that Tosh's words in "African" (1977) have had on Nicaraguan Creoles can be gauged through a telling example from my field research in Bluefields this past summer. Though unbeknownst to each other, and on the same afternoon, Bluefields resident Leslie Britton and visiting expatriate Fernando Carter both cited Tosh's lyrics as central to their understanding of Blackness. Leslie asserted that as long as one is Black one has an identity from Africa, and in a similar vein, Fernando proclaimed that Creoles descend directly from Africa.<sup>4</sup> These claims to Africa as the origin and "homeland" are significant given that, historically, Creoles have not always identified as Black. In order to better comprehend this seeming disparity in Creole diasporic politics, it is critical to consider both colonial and Creole history, as well as Creole ethno-genesis in Nicaragua. Through an exploration of the conditions that have galvanized some Creoles to employ a Black ethno-racial identity politic, this paper aims to provide a brief history of Atlantic Nicaragua and Creole ethno-genesis to discuss the mediums through which Creole diasporic politics are being waged. Through a careful analysis of archival documents, secondary sources, and ethnographic interviews, this paper ultimately argues that in the face of increasing marginalization under Nicaraguan mestizo nationalism<sup>5</sup> there has been a strong and

steady increase of Black ethno-racial identification among Creoles in Bluefields.

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. Although they laid claim to the Atlantic coast as part of their colonial empire, most attempts at 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 by attacking their settlements, as well as to "occupy any land not held by Spain" (Floyd 1967, 18). Shortly after the occupation of Providence and San Andres Islands off the Mosquito Coast, the British began to occupy other settlements along the shore, such as Cape Gracias a Dios<sup>6</sup> and Bluefields, for trading expeditions (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 imported Black slaves primarily from Jamaica to work their newly-established mahogany, indigo, and sugar plantations (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 the number of West Indians of African descent who came to the Atlantic coast to work 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 particularly alarming considering their long history of struggle for rights to land, sovereignty, and survival as an ethnic group free from racial discrimination. 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

1 One of two English-Speaking Afro-descendant groups from Nicaragua's Atlantic coast.

2 Other languages spoken in Bluefields include Spanish, Miskitu, Mayangna, and Rama.

3 For Black diasporic consciousness in political struggles, see Watts Smith (2014).

4 Interviews with Leslie Britton and Fernando Carter, Bluefields 07/30/14.

5 What Deborah Thomas calls a wedding of citizenship to formations of mestizaje, or mixture, that "[privilege] the contribution of the European" (2013, 521).

6 Cape, located between what is now the northern border of the Northern Autonomous Region of Nicaragua and the Southeastern Honduran department, is also known as Gracias a Dios.

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*<sup>7</sup> “founders” played a major role in the omission of Pacific Blackness from national history as well as in the embedding of a structural system 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. In fact, it was used to bolster the nationalist notion of *mestizaje*. 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—as having resulted in 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 also to racialize its largely *mestizo* inhabitants as white in that process.

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. Gordon’s critical intervention in Atlantic coast historiography lies in his strategically authoritative construction of a Creole history and ethno-genesis from which a Black diasporic identity politics can be waged to bolster claims to autonomy, land, and anti-discrimination rights.

Alongside Nicaraguan independence and the origin myth of *mestizaje*, there are several other key moments marking the ways in which postcolonial *mestizo* nationalism has negatively impacted the Caribbean coast. One such moment is the 1984 Nicaraguan military occupation and annexation of the Mosquitia, known as “re-incorporation”<sup>8</sup> by Hispanic Nicaraguans and “overthrow” (*uovatrúo*) by Creoles. This event is now considered by Creoles to be the ultimate historical act of Nicaraguan *mestizo* nationalism and a grand attempt to Hispanicize the Atlantic coast’s various ethnic groups. Annexation of the Mosquitia would mean 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 mandatory Spanish language policies in schools across the coast, the replacement of Creoles in business, government, and various professions with *mestizos*, and the preference for 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 to the ways in which mandatory Spanish instruction disadvantaged people on the coast. For example, my mother can only (and barely) write in Spanish even though Creole English is her native language.

The next key moment, alongside independence and annexation, is the nationalist, anti-imperialist Sandinista Revolution<sup>9</sup> of 1979 and the ensuing civil war of the 1980s that many Creoles have perceived 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<sup>10</sup> 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 against Nicaragua, weakened Creoles’ economic position (Gabbert 2011, 53). The reasons that the Sandinista Revolution is likened to the overthrow of 1894 has to do primarily with the military occupation of the Atlantic coast for the recruiting of rebel Sandinista fighters, in combination 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). Overall, the Sandinistas failed to understand the unique history of the Atlantic coast, ultimately mirroring the *mestizo* Nicaraguans’ sense of superiority almost a century earlier.

Although 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 that 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 coastal 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 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” (Goett 2004, 8), and has continued to write off Afro-descendent 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 nec-

7 American-born, Spanish descendants.

8 On “re-incorporation,” see von Oertzen et al. (1985); Gabbert (2011, 52).

9 Led to the downfall of the Somoza family dictatorship that lasted from 1936-1979.

10 Moravian missionaries first came to the Atlantic coast of Nicaragua in the late 1840s and have had a long history of involvement with Creoles and indigenous groups, often providing educational facilities with English teaching.

essarily redress institutionalized anti-Black racism, which is often the problem with multicultural discourses. Kain (2006) notes that the concept of multiculturalism itself 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” (Kain 2006, 81). Kain advocates instead for interculturalism, a process of co-existence, sharing, exchanging, and mutually respecting (Kain 2006, 81). 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 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 2012, 278). Hooker analyzes the connections between the current emphasis on Blackness in conceptions of Creole identity and changes to Nicaragua’s model of multiculturalism that begin to recognize the existence of ethno-racial hierarchy and to implement specific 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.

Given the rampant Black erasure and mestizo nationalism in Nicaragua, Hooker suggests that Creoles are beginning to imagine a collective Black transnational identity linking them to the Black diaspora. Furthermore, 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 (Hooker 2012, 278). A connection to the Black diaspora is most likely pertinent given the global recognition of historical Black struggles. 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, they will need to draw on their membership as global Black citizens to mark themselves as a distinct minority group in Nicaragua. These analyses suggest that ethnic mobilization alone cannot grant Creoles the kind of anti-Black discrimination and cultural rights for which they are struggling.

My ethnographic research suggests 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*, neither being Black nor ethnically Creole is enough to win both kinds of rights. 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.”<sup>11</sup> 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. They do so not only for rights under the multicultural citizenship regime, but also as a form of cultural preservation given deep-rooted Nicaraguan structural racism.

11 Interview with Mary Britton, Bluefields 07/28/14.

Before engaging in a discussion on the impact of mestizo nationalism on Black identity formation in Bluefields, it is important to note the important contribution this research makes in 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 (Hooker 2012, 274). Although this may be true for some lighter skinned Creoles, my interviews with approximately 20 Creoles suggest that most Black-identifying Creoles (including both darker and lighter skinned Creoles) imagine an inclusive Black Creole identity category. That is, they see all Creoles—as Afro-descendants—as falling under the Black Creole marker regardless of skin color. Similar 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.”<sup>12</sup>

Rather than commenting on the divisions within Creole society, the primary division Rayfield alluded to is 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 now historical 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,<sup>13</sup> 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.”<sup>14</sup> Despite this increasing mestizo immigration and the historical legacies of mestizo nationalism, such as enforced language policies and Black erasure in national curriculums, 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.

This assertion of Black identity among Creoles has not been a long-standing position. However, 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 subjugation under British rule. As Gabbert’s (2011) ground-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”<sup>15</sup> attempted to “dissociate themselves both socially and culturally from their African heritage and to conform to the European standards imposed” (Gabbert 2011, 46). While striving for both social mobility and legal equality, freed

12 Interview with Rayfield Hodgson, Bluefields 08/03/14.

13 Interview with Graciela Brackett, Bluefields 07/30/14.

14 Interview with Veronica Johnson, Bluefields 07/30/14.

15 Afro-American population of mixed European and African ancestry.

slaves had little option but to emphasize both their white ancestry and their distance from those still enslaved.

This kind of identity politics taken up by Creoles should not preclude Creole identification as Black. In *Disparate Diasporas* (1998), Gordon engages this notion in his discussion of Creole identity formation. He argues that identity and diasporic consciousness can shift over time according to sociopolitical context by providing 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 this analysis, when Creoles express sentiments of Anglo-affinity it is likely that those sentiments are politically and practically motivated, such as in the case of the annexation as well as the revolution. With that said, Creole identification as Black must also be understood in a socio-historical context. Despite the dangers of a functional anthropological discourse, there is something to be said, for example, of the sustained prominence of Afro-Creole cultural practices, such as Maypole,<sup>16</sup> gombay,<sup>17</sup> obeah and funeral wakes (Gabbert 2011, 43; Moody-Freeman 2004). These ostensibly African “retentions”<sup>18</sup> 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).

Today, 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, with reggae, calypso, and soca playing from homes, automobiles, and disco clubs. This is not to say, however, that there is not a rich tradition of musical production among Creoles, given the prominence of several Creole music groups and musicians such as 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. In a 1994 *Los Angeles Times* article, Raymond Myers talks about his life in the United States and the influence that Marley and Tosh have had on his music. Central to Myers’ discussion of Afro-Caribbean music forms is their power to alleviate stress and touch the soul in times of civil war and political strife.

Beyond these traditional cultural practices, migration to the United States might be another factor encouraging Creoles to identify as Black in the face of political struggle. Constance Sutton’s (1987) study of working class migration as central to Bajan ethnic and racial consciousness can be applied to Creoles. Sutton links the post-World War II liberalization of Western nations’ immigration policies and the subsequent Bajan immigration to these countries with the growth of racial consciousness both at home and abroad. Citing experiences of racism and exclusion where—in the United States, for example—whites lumped Bajans and other Afro-Caribbean groups together with American Blacks, Sutton describes Bajan-Black

American relations as kindling the influence that the Civil Rights and Black Power movements would have in Barbados. By 1971 there was a growing demand in Bajan village communities for books by Eldridge Cleaver, Malcolm X, and George Jackson due to a new heightened awareness of colonial oppression (Sutton 1987, 110). Similar processes occurred for Creoles who, in the early to mid-20th century began migrating to the Nicaraguan capital of Managua and the United States in order to find work (Gabbert 2011, 54). Rayfield Hodgson, having migrated to the United States for school and work in the 1970s, recounted hearing about the Black Power movement for the first time and returning to Bluefields sporting an Afro. At this time, he reflected his new heightened political awareness after exposure to the Black Power and Black is Beautiful movements.

As my informants have shown, there are innumerable ways in which Creoles can choose to deploy their own brand of diasporic consciousness. However, the unanimous claim among the Bluefields residents I interviewed is that a diasporic politics is absolutely necessary in the face of Nicaraguan mestizo nationalism and multiculturalism. Creoles in Nicaragua continue to face the effects of a historic mestizo nationalism that has physically and ideologically encroached on the Atlantic coast via military occupation, the imposition of Spanish-language policies, Black erasure in school curriculums, and the occupation of regional government and political jobs by mestizos. Moreover, it is virtually impossible to appeal to cultural and race-based rights. Adding to these neocolonial practices, white supremacist mestizo nationalism along with the legacies of British colonialism have instilled within many Creoles a sense of colorism that is inherently about internal group divisions, creating distinctions like “Black Creole” and “white Creole.” It is precisely because of these conditions, among others, that Creoles in Nicaragua are increasingly taking up Black, ethno-racial diasporic politics.

Whether via a sense of community, an attachment to the arts, or an awakening sprouted by migration elsewhere, Creoles in Bluefields are showing strong commitments to diasporic consciousness. Diasporic formations at the community level may look like Veronica Johnson’s politics that urged Creoles to strengthen their cultural practices during a time when they were a minority population due to increasing mestizo immigration. It may also look like Mary Britton’s eschewing of colorism when she asserts that being Creole is not about one’s skin color but rather their belonging to the “Black ethnic group.” In terms of the arts and music, a diasporic politics can be ignited by a song’s lyrics, as in Leslie and Fernando’s case, or even during migration abroad, as was experienced by Raymond Myers during reflections on the political situation at home.

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16 Fertility celebration held in May, arguably brought to Atlantic Nicaragua via British settlers in the early 1830s. It has been modified by Creoles and is now thought to be either a distinctly Afro-Nicaraguan or Jamaican tradition.

17 Afro-diasporic music and dance forms.

18 For Herskovits’ acculturation model, see *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1941).

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