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# Post-Sandinista Ethnic Identities in Western Nicaragua

FOLLOWING THE 1990 electoral defeat of the Sandinista Front, an indigenous people's movement took shape in western Nicaragua. In one way this was not surprising, given the ongoing growth and spread of indigenous movements throughout the hemisphere during the past two decades. But it was very surprising in another light, given the assumptions made by Nicaraguan intellectuals and leaders throughout this century. Elite intellectuals of the dynastic Somoza family dictatorship (1937–79) and the revolutionary Sandinista leadership (1979–90) were alike in assuming that Indian communities and indigenous identities had disappeared from western Nicaragua sometime during the 19th century, if not earlier.<sup>1</sup>

Pablo Antonio Cuadra, one of this century's most erudite and well-published Nicaraguan authors, wrote that the Indians of the western region had been subsumed by a new people, the mestizo Nicaraguans:

The lands of the Pacific [in Nicaragua] are the region of the easy life. Their great fertility, healthfulness, and the ease with which communication can be maintained over its terrains have attracted since prehistory the densest populations and initiated the development of the principal indigenous cultures from which our mestizo Nicaraguan culture was created. [1981:209]<sup>2</sup>

By contrast, Jaime Wheelock Roman, Nicaraguan historian and Minister of Agrarian Reform for most of the ten years of Sandinista government, analyzed indigenous disappearance in terms of the class struggle in Nicaragua and the creation of the mestizo working class:

The Indian in Nicaragua was slowly experiencing a progressive transformation toward a complete conversion into campesinos of the small peasant type, acquiring the consciousness and concerns of the small proprietors and, in this way, engendering a struggle of a profoundly economic

and class character in place of what had previously been an ethnic and religious struggle. [1981:89]

The common-knowledge assumption shared by these two authors, that Indians had disappeared from western Nicaragua and Hispanic mestizos had come to predominate, became a Foucauldian "regime of truth" (Foucault 1980). Jeffrey Gould (1993) has termed it "the myth of Nicaragua mestiza." This myth, in both Somocista and Sandinista forms, narrates the transformation of communities of indigenous peoples into lower-class individuals whose formerly collective ethnic identity is replaced by allegiance to a nonethnic, Nicaraguan national identity. When told by elite intellectuals such as Cuadra, this narrative occasionally recognized that the supposedly extinct indigenous societies had in some way "contributed" to the richness of Nicaraguan national culture. The Sandinista Front's explicit rejection of the social injustices of a long history of elite domination, culminating in the tyranny of Somocismo and the economic prostration of Nicaragua, was not accompanied by a decisive departure from the myth of Nicaragua mestiza. Throughout the 20th century, the myth has remained an integral part of constructions of Nicaraguan national identity by the state.

The appearance of the indigenous movement in the shadow of the myth of Nicaragua mestiza suggests that this myth is weakening and raises the possibility that it might be substantially altered. The movement offers a counternarrative of Nicaraguan history in which Indians survived instead of disappearing and in which Nicaragua is not and has never been entirely mestizo. Recent academic literature about "borderlands" identities (Alarcón 1990; Anzaldúa 1987) suggests that transforming the myth of Nicaragua mestiza might require at least as much attention to mestizo identity as to indigenous, but the movement has yet to address the mestizo side of the question. It thus offers a strictly limited revision of Nicaraguan national identity.

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## Analytic Positionings and Tensions

During the mid-1980s, I conducted fieldwork in communities of pottery-producing artisans in the Pacific littoral and highland regions of western Nicaragua. These communities had rejected the *indigenista* policies of the Sandinista Ministry of Culture in favor of an independent artisans' union.<sup>3</sup> They understood that the indigenous identity offered by the cultural bureaucrats was both demeaning and inconsequential with respect to their daily concerns at work (Field 1995). Yet one of these communities, San Juan de Oriente, has historically self-identified as indigenous and continues to do so. When I resumed fieldwork in this region in 1993, I learned that the women who make *cerámica negra* (black pottery) in the northern highland city of Matagalpa had embraced an indigenous origin for their craft and aligned their families with the indigenous movement of the region. This occurred even though these women had proudly maintained a mestiza origin for their craft during the 1980s. On the other hand, I found that the artisans of San Juan de Oriente, in the Pacific littoral, had not become involved with the indigenous movement even though they call themselves Indians. Instead, they had entered a new period of highly individualized ceramic production and marketing.

Tensions in my analysis of the artisans, and of indigenous identity in western Nicaragua, reflect cleavages within cultural anthropology (see Field 1994). The conventional linkage between cultural markers (particularly language) and cultural identities invites a search for the former in order to substantiate the latter. Activism among cultural anthropologists working with indigenous peoples carries with it a cultural survivalist preoccupation with the fate of minority and endangered peoples in nation-states. Indigenous peoples are cast as inherently more interesting and important than non-Indians, and their survival is seen as heroic. In contrast, other anthropologists working in Latin America have argued that indigenous identity is shaped not merely by traits retained from the ancient past but by a history of resistance to nation-states. This social-constructionist analysis of identity requires anthropologists to uncover and describe the specific historical conditions producing elements of identity, attending to their dynamically continuous transformation. It also encourages ethnographers to transform their relationships with local intellectual informants in the direction of collaboration and exchange.

My own research was carried out in collaboration with Flavio Gamboa, a Nicaraguan intellectual and leader of the indigenous movement who comes from Monimbó, a barrio in the city of Masaya, near San Juan de Oriente. His politics and research, like many ethnic and racial discourses elaborated by local intellectuals,

is concerned with defining who is and is not included in groups. My own work, like that done by many other contemporary anthropologists, attempts to deconstruct identity discourses and lay bare their historical construction. But Jonathan Friedman has issued a warning:

If one is engaged in "negotiating culture," that is, involved in the construal and interpretation of ethnographic or historical realities, then one is bound on a collision course with others for whom such realities are definitive. Culture is supremely negotiable for professional culture experts, but for those whose identity depends upon a particular configuration this is not the case. Identity is not negotiable. Otherwise it has no existence. . . . The constitution of identity is an elaborate and deadly serious game of mirrors. It is a complex temporal interaction of multiple practices of identification external and internal to a subject or population. In order to understand the constitutive process it is, thus, necessary to be able to situate the mirrors in space and their movement in time. [1994:140–141]

The contrasts between Gamboa's and my own historical and ethnographic exegeses test whether or not anthropology can offer a nonessentializing analysis of identity discourses in the context of collaborative relationships with the intellectuals who elaborate those discourses. Gamboa and I have agreed to follow topics of mutual interest toward different ends, which has tended to bring out the tensions between and within our respective analytic perspectives. I cannot deny, however, that the present text inscribes his projects within mine, even when we disagree. Here, at least, I have the last word.

The juxtaposition of our differently positioned analyses is a means to evaluate the changes in a nationalist regime of truth (the myth of Nicaragua mestiza) and the possible implications for an overall reconstruction of Nicaraguan national identity. Such an attempt has been carried out in light of the difficulties encountered in operationalizing Foucauldian theories of power. Edward Said has observed that "there is always something beyond the reach of dominating systems, no matter how deeply they saturate society, and this is obviously what makes change possible, limits power in Foucault's sense, and hobbles the theory of that power" (1983:246–247). Claudio Lomnitz-Adler's (1992) discussion of "internal articulatory intellectuals" (which is to say, those individuals who both elaborate indigenous identities internally to their communities and articulate their communities' political demands to the elite-dominated state) suggests that such individuals occupy a pivotal role in challenging and redefining local and national regimes of truth.

## Indigenous Transformations

Gamboa and I agree about the history of indigenous resistance to successive states but disagree about the

history of identity markers, such as language. In the following excerpt from his "The Mankemes and their Language," his historical recounting of Spanish colonialism and its repression of Indian identity is also an attempt to reclaim the Mangué language from the obscurity of extinction and to reinstate it in a linguistic and literary context. As it progresses, his essay becomes more oriented toward linguistics and less toward history and serves to assert a notion of identity based on language:

The territory of the Mankesa, a broad band of land on the Pacific coast of Central America, stretches from the shores of Lake Xolotlan to the Gulf of Nicoya (Costa Rica). Its inhabitants were known as Mankemes and their language Mangué, and it was composed of 28 chiefdoms or states. The capital was the "City of the Peaks," Diria. Each chiefdom had its own social structure, and the 28 local governments met every seven lunar *soles*, that is, every seven years, to elect among them the Diriankeme who would govern them using his power as "Prince and Lord of the 28 Chiefdoms for Seven Years." . . .

On the 12th of October 1492 began the total destruction of Cemanahuac, exterminated and brutalized by the Spanish system which initiated the colonial effort with the scourge of Spanish prisons. Antonio de Mendoza, made the first Viceroy of New Spain in 1550, experienced problems in understanding the subjugated populations that still spoke innumerable languages. For this reason it was necessary to establish a single language for which he sought the help of the King to find a solution. . . .

The royal order abolishing languages arrived and was enforced without delay. All messages, warrants, and official requests had to be in Nahuatl and written as the Spanish authorities mandated. This law extended over the confines of the entire New World and, in this way, played a role in the definitive and mortal blow to the Native peoples of Cemanahuac, which was the expropriation of the Mother Earth from them. Without the right to use their own languages and to worship their own deities, this was total genocide.

The Mankemes spoke their own language until the middle of the 17th century, at which point the Nahuatl language was introduced and the Castillianization of Native personal names began. . . . Most Mangué words have many meanings and are not used in a singular mode or expressed with only one set of tones but, instead, are used in agreement with the subject under discussion. Wherefore this idiom is more expressive than the Spanish language, and for this reason the translations that do not address variations in tone, form, and meaning have stayed static and mordant. [Gamboa in press]

In my own historical reconstruction of the decline and transformation of indigenous ethnic markers, processes taking place much later play a major role. The Zelaya regime of the late 19th century attempted to create a strong state, the first such attempt in Nicaraguan history. In effect, the historical moment in which the Nicaraguan state began to emerge out of the chaos that

preceded it was also the moment in which the myth of the Nicaragua mestiza was deployed to construct the Nicaraguan nation.<sup>4</sup> After Zelaya, intellectuals took for granted the truth that Nicaragua was becoming, or had become, an ethnically homogeneous society.

Spanish ethnographer Javier García Bresó (1992) asserts that stigmatization was the stimulus behind the fading of identity markers in Monimbó, but I would argue for a more complicated process in the long run. The fading of clear markers of indigenous identity, whatever its initial cause, likely encouraged elites to appropriate indigenous communities' resources under the pretext that these communities were no longer Indian and did not enjoy any special relationship to land and locality. As far as elite history and literature were concerned, their inhabitants did not look, act, or sound like Indians. On the other hand, an increasing number of individuals in indigenous communities such as Monimbó learned to read and write Spanish, and such educated individuals composed a new group of local intellectuals distinct from the traditional leadership. Instead of initiating a discourse of Indianness, they were more likely to articulate a version of the elite's nationalist discourse.

It is difficult for anthropologists to analyze such an outcome without reference to the profoundly conventional disciplinary concepts of assimilation and acculturation (Adams 1957). Much like the myth of Nicaragua mestiza, assimilation narratives elide indigenous identities when they do not conform to the anthropologist's version of tradition, greatly simplifying complex cultural transformations. Historians also gloss cultural and linguistic transitions far too lightly. In reference to the extinction of both the Mangué and Maribio languages, one historian asserts that "the Indians of the Pacific coast found it necessary, desirable and useful to abandon their languages and speak Spanish" (Burns 1991: 126). These superficial assessments are perhaps easier to pass off in western Nicaragua than elsewhere, since indigenous languages faded out so long ago. Gamboa is the only person whom I have met in this region whose family preserves even the memory of having spoken an indigenous language.

Gould (1995) understands western Nicaraguan language extinctions as the aggregate effect of several generations of indigenous individuals who internalized the stigma against Indianness. Here we should remember that Judith Friedlander (1975) has shown that, while stigmatization denatured Indian culture in Hueyapan (central Mexico), Nahuatl survived as a spoken language. Speaking Nahuatl stigmatized people, but it also empowered them to carry out their lives in secret from mestizos. Such a dynamic is by no means uncommon in the history of the Americas. Further, as has been shown by Jane Hill and Kenneth Hill (1986) for Mexico and Greg Urban (1991) for Paraguay, the speaking of

"Indian" languages is not necessarily the marker of indigenous identity. An attractive option for a social-constructionist analysis is to disentangle indigenous identities from language survival. If this is done, the survival of each individual community must be explained with reference to divergent and locally specific factors. The people of each of these areas then become different "kinds" of Indians. Some people, such as those from San Juan de Oriente and Monimbó, are Indians because they are artisans and are artisans because they are Indians. This is precisely what San Juaneros say when I ask them about being Indian. Indigenous Monimboseño identity, however, diverges from indigenous San Juanero identity when it comes to their respective relationships with the state. For some western Nicaraguan communities such as Monimbó, the linkage between Indianness and resistance to the state offered a counterweight to stigmatization that facilitated the reproduction of Indian identity from one generation to the next.

Gamboa and I do not concur about the nature of indigenous political institutions around which resistance to the state has been organized. From my perspective, the conquest clearly demolished the political structure of the old chiefdoms (*cacicazgos*), and by the 18th century indigenous leadership was composed of two institutions. The council of elders (*consejo de ancianos*) was very likely a pre-Hispanic institution but was one that the Spanish colonial regime transformed in important ways, particularly with respect to gender. Mercedes Olivera (1992) observed that the Spaniards eliminated women from positions of public power. Marcos Membraño Idiaquez (1992) and García Bresó (1992) have shown that the colonial regime also strengthened the ability of particular indigenous families, those whose members cooperated most fully with the Spaniards, to maintain control over the council and to accumulate resources for their benefit. This was especially true for families from whom the colonial authorities appointed the "mayor of the cane" (*alcalde de vara*), the council leader authorized by the silver-headed wooden cane received from the Spanish king. This office continued to exist into the independence period in both Monimbó and in another important indigenous community, Sutiava, but the council persists only in Monimbó (Membraño Idiaquez 1992). Gamboa is well acquainted with this history, but while I see the institutions of the council of elders and the mayor as arguing for a nonessentialized history of indigenous identity in Monimbó, he sees them as evidence for the persistence of traditional leadership.

We both agree, however, that the emergence of the Somocista state of the early and mid-20th century activated political resistance to the state in many indigenous communities and that this was also the historical period in which the myth of Nicaragua mestiza co-

lesced. García Bresó (1992) has shown that Monimbó's oppositional history and the stigmatization of Monimboseños by non-Indians in the city of Masaya were the decisive factors congealing Indian identity there. Monimbó, which continued to elect its mayor of the cane, gained a reputation as a dangerous place where guardsmen and police were attacked by drunken Indians and where the population continued to favor their own artisanal goods over the flood of cheap imports that came in as a result of Somocista trade policy. At the same time, the municipal Somocista government in Masaya expropriated the last bits of communal land in Monimbó, according to Membraño Idiaquez (1992). As impoverished artisans and proletarians came to dominate the population of both Monimbó and Sutiava, people in these communities continued to consider themselves Indians. The existence and character of 20th-century indigenous communities thus directly challenged the elite regime of truth about mestizaje in Somocista Nicaragua. These communities were consequently under continuous attack by the Somocista state economically, militarily, and ideologically. Nicaraguan sociologist Mario Rizo Zeledón comments, "If one looks for a body of national literature specifically concerning indigenous communities of the [western] region, we are met with thematics that absolutely ignore their existence" (1992:61). Resistance by indigenous communities to Somocismo was not within the realm of the discussible. Non-Indian Nicaraguans were supposed to rest assured that Indians really had disappeared, even though they continued to label Monimbó and other communities as "Indian."

In the northern highlands, the region of the black-pottery women, the history of indigenous identity and artisanal production clearly diverge, but resistance to the nation-building state is shared with Monimbó and Sutiava. Zelaya's project impacted the indigenous communities in the northern highlands because his aggressive pursuit of economic modernization brought about the large-scale cultivation of coffee by European immigrants in that region, beginning in the 1870s (Williams 1986). Agro-export production of coffee in Nicaragua required the dispossession of the communal lands of Matagalpa Indians, who composed a large percentage of the land owners in the highlands during this period. These intrusions were met by persistent insurrections against the state by the rural Indians. Rose Spalding's (1994) portrait of the weakness of Nicaraguan elites during the first half-century of independence suggests that they may have felt especially compelled to confront, defeat, and disgrace any force they perceived as impeding the progress of their construction of political economy and national identity.

When the majority of Matagalpa Indians lost their land, they not only joined the ranks of semiproletarians

working for the benefit of the elite's agro-export coffee capitalism but also became the objects of a new politics of stigmatization (see CIERA 1984). As in the Monimbó region, cultural differences assigned to the category "Indian" became the signs that marked individuals and communities as being outside the nation. In the highlands, Indians occupied a category below the subaltern status of mestizo agricultural workers. Under such circumstances, most Matagalpa Indians abandoned their clothing and other visible markers of Indian identity. At the same time the issues of land, community control over land, and resistance to the domination of export crops became the skeleton upon which the body of indigenous identity hung and still hangs. Thus in the highlands, resistance to the state combined not with artisanal production but with specific relationships to land and farming (even if those relationships persisted mostly in memory) to define the kind of Indian that survived.

There is at least one exception to this picture of the highlands. In El Chile, an isolated village located in rugged terrain east of the city of Matagalpa, the artisanal production of cloth persisted, woven by women from locally grown cotton varieties. Until recently El Chile cloth was brilliantly tinted by vegetable dyes and by weaving together threads from varieties of cotton that naturally have color. Several older women continued to weave cotton cloth clandestinely when the Somocista state outlawed small-scale cultivation and processing of cotton, surely one of the most bizarre and irrational facets of that state's paranoid pursuit of power (Angel and Macintosh 1987). In the 1990s these same women and their children pepper their Spanish conversation with words from either Nahuatl or the Matagalpa language. The oldest people may still have spoken Matagalpa into the 1950s, although the stigmatization of indigenous identity in this region, as throughout western Nicaragua, meant that at the very least Indians ceased to speak it anywhere they might be overheard by non-Indians. Concerning El Chile's Indianness, Christina Hernandez, one of the elderly women who continued to weave under Somocismo, told me, "In the time of the grandmothers, they still used the plant dyes, and also they could speak [the old language]. [We still use] the old kinds of cotton, make this pottery, cook that way [with a *comal*] over there."

In the mid-1980s El Chile's isolation was altered by self-identified mestiza black-pottery women, who facilitated the link between the Sandinista Ministry of Culture and El Chile. Later the black-pottery women helped the El Chile weavers affiliate with the independent artisans' union. This affiliation produced new results in the 1990s, when the involvement of the El Chile villagers with the indigenous movement over issues of land rights led their friends the black-pottery women to af-

firm and identify with indigenous history in the Matagalpa region.

But this is jumping ahead. Next I deal with the other side of the coin of indigenous transformation: the creation of the mestizo majority who came to outnumber the Indians, of whatever kind, and who became thematically enshrined in state constructions of the Nicaraguan nation.

## Discourses and Narratives in a Mestizo Country

Many meanings are attributed to *mestizaje* (or becoming and being mestizo) in the currently burgeoning academic literature on this subject. Here I will refer to and contest *mestizaje* in three ways: as a process of biological miscegenation; as a process of nation-building which requires that mestizos, as individuals and collectivities, undergo "de-Indianization" in order to accommodate national identity in ways that Indians cannot; and as a process that necessarily creates a panoply of divergent identity positions.

The extreme demographic decline of indigenous peoples in the region that became Nicaragua was accompanied by the sudden emergence of mixed populations. In León, Granada, Masaya, Managua, and other colonial cities, peninsular and criollo (American-born) Spaniards ruled, but the majority of the population was composed of groups of people who were not Indians, not Spaniards, and not criollos (see Stanislawski 1983). Most of this population had parents, grandparents, and other more distant ancestors from the indigenous civilizations of the area, as well as from Spain and in many cases from regions of Africa as well. They spoke Spanish, usually mixed with words from indigenous languages, were at least nominally Catholic, dressed in a European style, and from early on were known as mestizos. It is undeniable that these new populations figured importantly in colonial western Nicaragua from an early date (Newson 1987).

For nationalists the fact of biological miscegenation is clearly insufficient to build a national identity; social categories must be manipulated to do so. Likewise, academic analyses utilizing Eurocentric concepts of race have been moderated by realizations that cannot be ignored since Ronald Stutzman's (1981) analysis of Ecuadorian *mestizaje*. As Claudio Esteva-Fabrigat puts the matter:

Mestizos, or Indians, and even blacks, have not always been categorized by either color or genealogy. There are many cases where they were conferred a Hispanic status just by living in the Spanish way or by being economically strong. Indians become mestizos, and mestizos become whites, when they adopted the Hispanic cultural form. . . . Racial mobility is culturally conditioned. [1995:56]

The work of Guillermo Bonfil Batalla represents a particularly sophisticated version of the recognition of the cultural nature of mestizaje, grounded in a relational discussion of both Indian and mestizo identity in the specific historical contexts of Spanish colonialism. He stressed that, while there had been considerable mixing of cultural elements among groups, mestizaje had not created "a new culture." Nationalist ideologies eulogized the mestizo as the harmonious fusion of European and Indian, often expressed as the mind of the European with the emotions of the Indian. But Bonfil Batalla viewed the formation of the mestizo as a "de-Indianization," the compulsory loss of the original ethnic identity. What was substituted was "not a new hybrid or mestizo culture that marries the best of two different civilizations [but] plainly and simply . . . a Western model," a modified version of Spanish worldviews and life ways developed by the criollos in their new circumstances (1992:44).

The pejorative view of mestizaje displayed by Bonfil Batalla characterizes much of the post-World War II literature, both among North American and Latin American social scientists. Among North American anthropologists a near total neglect of mestizos in countries with large indigenous populations (Guatemala, Bolivia, Peru, and Ecuador) made clear which population was most interesting, complex, and indeed "cultural," for ethnographers. Guatemalan scholar Carlos Guzmán-Bockler (1975) used the term *ningunidad* ("nobodiness") to describe mestizos, who, having been stripped of Indian somebody-ness, must be empty and undefined. Frequently, as in the case of Richard Adams (1957), anthropologists ascribed a tragic inevitability to mestizaje, with the accompany loss of interesting Indians. Thus while nationalists and social scientists might share cultural or biological essentialist assumptions, they have not necessarily agreed on the outcome of mestizaje. The simultaneous convergence and divergence between these two discourses is also present in Gamboa's worldview. If, for him, to be Indian is to maintain traditions of leadership and community organization, to be both rebellious and stigmatized, and, alternatively, to work as an artisan or own and farm land communally, then mestizo identity is distinguished by the absence of such behaviors and traditions. I learned about his perspective in 1993 during a field trip that he called "A Trip to Mestizo Country." An excerpt from my notes follows:

Flavio, Elwin, and I walked out into the fields leading away from don Hernando's house toward the bluffs overlooking the lake. These fields formed part of the terrain that the campesinos were newly cultivating, land that had only grazed cattle since the Spaniards arrived, Flavio remarked. We were looking for bits of old pottery. We didn't have long to wait. Strawn over the land and, as we soon saw, over the

several hectares all around us, we found thousands of broken pots, smashed to fragments by the tractors that the campesinos had rented to prepare the land for planting. The more we walked, the more we found. "There's enough here to fill four museums," Flavio said mournfully. Elwin and I busied ourselves collecting fragments painted with intricate white, black, and red designs. The tractors had done heavy-duty work, because among the bits of pots we noted large metates and grinding stones carved from heavy basalt rock, also pulverized by the agricultural machinery.

As we walked stooped over the ground, I saw that the campesinos had plowed these fields literally to within centimeters of the rim of bluffs that descended precipitously hundreds of meters to the lake's surface.

"Don Flavio," I said, "these people must notice that all the soil is being washed down these cliffs when the rains come. Why don't they leave a few trees or just some plants here at the rim to protect their soil?"

We had just found a tripod pot broken into about eight pieces, the first specimen we'd encountered for which there was any hope of piecing it back together. Flavio put the pieces into my backpack and peeled one of the oranges I had carried for Elwin.

"This is the work of the mestizo," he said finally. "Our campesinos don't value our past, don't value this land anymore. They are just thinking about today, about their *guarito* [rum]. The government of doña Violeta [Chamorro] says there is no money to save this history. But they have money for other things. That's what mestizaje did to this people."

This terrible view of mestizaje contrasts with other encounters that I have had with Gamboa, where it was possible to discover a less rigid boundary between Indian and mestizo, in effect calling into question his own categories and those of others. One direction to take in addressing these categories is to show the extent to which the conceptualization and lived behaviors of mestizo and Indian are in perpetual flux. In a conversation I had with Gamboa regarding his own standards for defining Indian identity in western Nicaragua, he spoke about the importance of knowing family history and showed me passages like the following one, reprinted from the Archivo General de Centroamérica in Guatemala City:

#### The Mestizo Antonio de Gamboa Solicits Recognition of his Status

Captain Don Antonio de Gamboa, citizen of León, in the province of Nicaragua, by letter of the law, appears before your Highness and declares that I am the descendant of the first caciques of the town of Subtiava [*sic*], enjoying the special privileges of my ancestors in possession of which I have lived all of my life which is justifiable through the information that dutifully and under the necessary oaths before you that which I request to be in my possession the Royal Cedula that your Majesty was moved to dispatch to generally favor all the caciques and [that] my ancestors

inherited from one to the next [generation] which documents the purity of our blood as an expression of our heritage, . . . and I ask that the original [documents] be returned to me. [Romero Vargas 1988:490]

Such documentation, as far as I can see, establishes the rights of people who are already mestizos but whose indigenous ancestry legitimizes their claim to nobility before colonial authorities. But Gamboa used these passages to show me just how indigenous his family has been for centuries. Thus a relationship to authority which marked mestizo identity in the 17th and 18th centuries has come to substantiate Indian identity in the 20th.

Such plasticity has long been evident in the Andes, where the bowler hats, woolen shawls, and old-fashioned dresses of colonial times have centuries later become the embodiments of Indian identity. Anibal Quijano (1980) described the intermediary stage between rural Indian and urban mestizo identities in Peru occupied by *cholos*, urban migrants currently in the process of de-Indianization. Cholos differ from Indians (who are by definition outside of national society) and from mainstream urban citizens, in their distinctive but changing dress and in linguistic and occupational traits that mark them as an ethnoclass apart: Indians who are almost but not quite Indians anymore. Marisol De la Cadena has drawn out this description much further, finding that in contemporary Cuzco,

drawing analytic boundaries (no matter how fluid) between present day "Indians" and "mestizos" is inaccurate and dismissive of subordinate definitions of both identities as relative social conditions. Among indigenous Cuzqueños calling someone mestizo/a (or Indian) is fixing momentarily (but only so) a point of reference inherently and fluidly related to Indian (or mestizo/a) . . . In Cuzco, de-Indianization is the process of empowering indigenous identities through economic and educational achievements, and displaying this identity in regional events of popular culture that take place ubiquitously in urban and rural stages. [1996:138]

In Nicaragua, the radical nationalism of Augusto C. Sandino, whose forces controlled much of the northern highlands in the late 1920s and early 1930s, went partially down the road to developing alternative versions of Nicaraguan mestizaje which transgressed the Indian-mestizo boundary. Sandino's nationalism had been influenced by his exposure to the *indigenismo* of the Mexican revolution, during a sojourn in Tampico. He referred to the people of Nicaragua and all Central America as "Indo-Latins," "Indo-Hispanics," or "Indo-Americans." On the one hand, he said, "I am a Nicaraguan, and I feel proud because in my veins circulates, more than anything else, Indian blood. . . . My highest honor is to have arisen from the bosom of the oppressed, who are the soul and nerve of the Race" (quoted in Ramirez

1981:144).<sup>5</sup> But he also said, "I used to look with resentment on the colonizing work of Spain, but today I have profound admiration for it. . . . Spain gave us its language, its civilization, and its blood. We consider ourselves the Spanish Indians of America" (quoted in Ramirez 1981:48; Belausteguigoitia 1981:200). Sandino elaborated a nationalism of perfect harmony between Indian and Spaniard, one that suggested de-Indianization need not occur. Instead, he saw Hispanic traits as additions to continuing Indian traditions. This is the fusion that Bonfil Batalla argues never occurred. Because Sandino lost, we cannot know what his version of the marriage between mestizaje and nation-building would have meant for the indigenous communities of the early 20th century. But his transgression of the mestizo-Indian border in western Nicaragua is resonant with recent academic work and with some of Gamboa's discourse. Jorge Klor de Alva, for example, emphasizes that "different forms of colonialism . . . are likely to create different forms of mestizaje." He adds that

the chameleon-like nature of mestizaje—Western in the presence of Europeans, indigenous in native villages, and Indian-like in contemporary United States barrios—is its crucial characteristic. It is the result of the ambiguous ethnic spaces that appeared in the wake of the demographic decimation of the indigenes, the introduction of enslaved Africans, and the extensive immigration of Europeans. [1995:253]

Calling mestizaje "chameleon-like" suggests a certain opportunistic will behind the transformative nature of mestizo identity but does not describe how the choices of individuals and groups change through time in places such as Nicaragua. A better description may be found in narratives from the pages of Gamboa's family notebooks. In one of these, his great-great-grandfather attends a large gathering of people from indigenous communities located in the Pacific littoral. The telling weaves together many people's memories, and the memories of one generation also become the memories of those that follow. Even so, the realm of individual taste and preference assumes at least as important a role as that played by "tradition." Clear lines are not drawn around "Indian" or "mestizo." The image of the marimba, a musical instrument of African origin but identified firmly with indigenous cultures from Mexico to Nicaragua, ubiquitous at Indian festivals but disliked by Gamboa's Indian ancestor, emerges as a multidimensional metaphor for the intertwining of Indian and mestizo in western Nicaragua.<sup>6</sup>

Both trait-driven schema and rigid ethnic boundaries are inadequate to account for the historical specificities of identities in western Nicaragua. If mestizos are mestizos, Indians are also mestizos. Artisanal production, "traditional" government, particular dances and

musical instruments, the performance of popular drama, and community solidarity in resistance to the state may describe Indian communities in western Nicaragua, but not all of these traits apply to all Indian communities. Indigenous Sutiava is not a center of artisanal production, and San Juan de Oriente has not been a focus of resistance to the state. Moreover, many of these traits apply to non-Indian communities: all of Masaya, and not just Monimbó, repeatedly rose against Somoza. Non-Indians make pottery and other artisanry elsewhere in western Nicaragua, and the marimba is played and popular drama is performed outside indigenous communities.

The understanding that mestizaje is fluid and that Indian and mestizo identities overlap in a manner that shapes the historical emergence of different kinds of Indians and different kinds of mestizos is already present in Gamboa's discourse. For him fluidity is ultimately evidence for the strength of tradition. The resemblance between such an understanding and contemporary work by Chicana intellectuals (see Alarcón 1990; Anzaldúa 1987), exploring and celebrating the multiplicity of mestiza identities in the political/cultural/sexual borderlands between Mexico and the United States, only briefly creates a comfort zone for the social construction of metropolitan intellectuals such as myself. There *is* a difference between exploring the tensions in Gamboa's discourse and his actual leadership (and that of other local intellectuals) in the indigenous movement of the 1990s.<sup>7</sup> In the latter context Gamboa's discourse remains a counternarrative to the elite's myth of Nicaragua mestiza. But there are prices to pay for such leadership, in terms of both the kinds of Indians who are willing to join such a movement and the implications for how far such a movement can go in its struggles with the Nicaraguan state.

### The Limitations of Counternarrative

The extensive participation of indigenous communities in the uprisings that defeated Somocismo posed conceptual challenges to Sandinista historiography, which had attempted to negotiate a marriage between Sandinista class analysis and the utopian indigenismo of the Minister of Culture, Ernesto Cardenal (see Institute for the Study of Sandinismo 1981). The Sandinistas attempted to categorize the indigenous communities that helped them as revolutionary classes rather than as insurrectionary communities, thereby eliding the ethnic factor (Field 1995). Their internalization of central themes from the myth of Nicaragua mestiza may have been related to the class origins of the Frente's leaders, which both Carlos Vilas (1992) and Samuel Stone (1990) have described as predominantly upper class and intertwined with the same Leonese and

Granadino elite lineages that have dominated Nicaragua since before independence. When the Sandinistas joined forces with Indian communities to bring down the Somocista state, even the partial acknowledgment of the existence of such communities necessarily unraveled one facet of the myth of Nicaragua mestiza. Sandinista guerrilla leader and revolutionary comandante Omar Cabezas detailed his experiences organizing in Sutiava:

Our work in Subtiava [*sic*] took off like wildfire, . . . [a]nd we started presenting the image of Sandino. . . . The Indians had a leader, an historical figure, who more than any other was representative of their people: Adiac. We presented Sandino as an incarnation of Adiac, then Adiac as an incarnation of Sandino, but Sandino in light of *The Communist Manifesto*, see? So from shack to shack, from Indian to Indian, ideas were circulating: Adiac . . . Sandino . . . class struggle . . . vanguard FSLN. Gradually a whole movement was born in Subtiava. [1985:36-37]

Cabezas's reference to Adiac, the last cacique of Sutiava, has not been forgotten by contemporary intellectuals from this community, such as Enrique de la Concepción. He told me, "The fact that the Frente could respect our history kept our relationship with the Frente very close for a long time." María Josefina Jarquín Moreno, an Indian leader from Matagalpa, stated that "during the [Sandinista] decade we have just experienced, we learned, in one form or another, to participate in political processes." These two individuals and others were introduced to politics by joining the Asociación del Trabajadores del Campo (Association of Rural Workers), the organization of the poorest (and often landless) people of the Nicaraguan countryside. The experience of local organizing, both to attract scarce state resources and to oppose state policies deemed inappropriate or misguided, profoundly affected many communities, including indigenous ones, and spawned new generations of local leaders or intellectuals during the 1980s. Some of these became leaders of the indigenous movement in the 1990s.

The alliance between Sandinista class ideology and Cardenal's indigenismo failed with indigenous communities because it romanticized Indianness without addressing the stigma of being an Indian. The Monimboseños did not need validation for their Indian identity and rejected it; the San Juaneros found indigenista discourse patronizing and not particularly useful for their needs. Still larger problems arose among the Miskitu on the Atlantic Coast. As Charles Hale (1994) observes, the Frente expected the Miskitu to think and behave like an oppressed class that would seek its liberation in the national revolutionary transformation.

The success of the Miskitu in legitimizing their identities and agendas during the last years of Sandinismo owed a great deal to North American Indian

organizations such as the American Indian Movement (AIM) and Akwesasne Notes. Although a relatively small indigenous minority, they succeeded in establishing their right to negotiate over land and community, even regional, autonomy. They established an important precedent for the indigenous communities of the western region, but they were taken aback by later organizing efforts in the western communities. Gamboa describes several scenes in the early 1990s during which delegations of indigenous leaders from Monimbó, Sutiava, and the northern highlands surprised Miskitu leaders by showing up for meetings with pan-Indianist leaders who were trying to organize for the Columbus quincentennial. Gamboa told me:

It is for certain that they [the Miskitus] didn't believe we existed anymore, just like the mestizos here [in the western region] didn't believe it. . . . It was us, here in the western part, who did the work to organize for the quincentennial, and we also forced the UNO [Unión Nacional Opositora, or United National Opposition] to include a Parlamento Indígena of our leaders in the Casa del Gobierno. It's true that the revolution did not help indigenous communities develop. This is very ironic, because the participation of the indigenous communities of the Pacific was decisive in the Sandinista triumph. The Frente recognized the rights of Indians only on the Atlantic Coast; the *costeños* were against the revolution, but they got autonomy. The Indians of the Pacific were always in favor of the revolution, but they got nothing. Now [after the defeat of the Sandinistas] it is up to us in the indigenous communities [of the western region] to investigate our situation. Where are the titles to our lands? Why did our languages disappear?

Pan-indigenous organizations from Latin America exercised a direct influence in western Nicaragua through their sponsorship of a Nicaraguan section of the Parlamento Indígena de América (Indigenous Parliament of America), organized to commemorate the quincentennial of Columbus's arrival in the Caribbean. Pan-hemispheric organizations reached the high tide of their influence on the western Nicaraguan movement when the Third Continental Meeting of Black, Indigenous, and Popular Resistance was held in Managua, October 6–12, 1992.

While struggles over land compose the substance of many if not all indigenous movements throughout Latin America, there are several movements that contextualize such issues within an overall demand for reconstructing the nation and national identity, including the indigenous confederation CONAIE (Confederación de las Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador) in Ecuador (see CONAIE 1989), the sprawling Mayan movement in Guatemala (see Warren 1992, 1996), and the EZLN (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional) in Mexico (see Gossen 1996; Ouwenweel 1996). One might, however, argue that the condition of being a minority has

dictated that the indigenous movement in Nicaragua must be a movement struggling for minority rights, yet the indigenous movement in Colombia, also representing a small minority in that country, has been linked to a broad effort to reconfigure the Colombian nation-state (see Field 1996).

The public discourse of indigenous intellectuals such as Gamboa, de la Concepción Fonseca of Sutiava, Jorge Hernandez of Sebaco, and others is dominated by the struggle for land, particularly land in a communal form, and for community development through government support for infrastructure and education. Their movement thus responds specifically to the exigencies facing indigenous communities in the northern highlands and the northern Pacific coast. These communities, in the main small villages of farming folk but also including the large urban barrio of Sutiava, are located in zones of historically heavy agro-export production and massive concentration of land ownership at the expense of communal lands. Notwithstanding important differentiating factors between Sutiava, Monimbó, and rural highlands communities in the Matagalpa region, I found a common thread in their search for original titles to lands and in battles with municipal authorities who refuse to recognize either the legitimacy of indigenous land claims or the rights of the indigenous community to participate in local government (see also Rizo Zeledón 1992).

With respect to the experiences, problems, and aspirations of artisans in indigenous communities where their activities are economically dominant, the relevance of the contemporary indigenous movement in western Nicaragua is far less clear. Monimbó's involvement with the indigenous movement does reflect a desire within that community to regain long-lost lands in the hilly countryside south of the barrio. But I would contend, and Gamboa has agreed, that Monimbó's involvement may derive just as much from its historical opposition to a succession of Nicaraguan state-building efforts, opposition that the indigenous movement offers in the 1990s. For San Juaneros who are neither engaged in a struggle over land nor define their particular indigenous identity by historical opposition to the state, the movement offers little of interest. My attempts to draw them into a discourse about identity (mestizo, indigenous, or any combination thereof) have been met by a consistent response, drawing my attention back to their daily lives as potters.

"What do *you* mean by indigenous identity, Les?" Agustín Amador asked me at his house. He was not necessarily tired of the topic, which we had been discussing for two weeks already. But he seemed to enjoy turning the questions back on me in front of Gamboa.

"Language, beliefs, dress, that sort of thing," I responded automatically.

"There is none of that here," Agustín replied dryly. "Here, we are potters, the old families that have always lived here, and the newer families as well. Pottery is being Indian. But pottery is what we do, and being Indian is not really our concern."

Catalina Bracamonte remarked, "I guess being a Bracamonte, in my family, that means you are a potter. And if you are a potter here, you are an Indian. Although some people don't like to be called Indian, Les, I'll tell you that, well, this is what we are."

Juanita Bracamonte laughed at the subject when I brought it up. "You know that already," she observed. "Here in San Juan, we make pottery. That's enough said about our identity."

These laconic and tolerant remarks contrast with what I have found among the women who make *cerámica negra*. These formerly vociferous critics of the indigenismo of Cardenal's Ministry of Culture once proudly defended their mestizo origins of their craft. In the 1990s the black-pottery women can potentially gain from a relationship with the indigenous movement because of the movement's high profile in the north. The reconfiguration of the history of their craft in their cooperative's pamphlet underscores their realignment: "*Cerámica negra* has been dated by archaeologists to the Formative Period (1500 BC–400 AD). . . . *Cerámica Negra* has experienced the phenomenon of cultural persistence, maintaining in virtually the same form technical and esthetic roots [derived from] aboriginal culture" (Sociedad Colectiva de Cerámica Negra 1990). In Matagalpa, unlike San Juan, artisanal production has become a reinvigorated sign of indigenous ethnic identity. This has become true both for the people of the El Chile, who are like other indigenous people in Matagalpa struggling to recover communal lands, and for urban mestiza artisans who have decided to validate their craft as indigenous in the sociocultural milieu of the post-Sandinista state, which is decidedly hostile to artisans and artisanal production.

The lack of San Juanero interest in the indigenous movement does not discredit the movement, but it does underscore that the movement's themes are irrelevant to some of the kinds of Indians who survived into the 20th century. The counternarrative promoted by the indigenous movement challenges the myth of Nicaragua mestiza but also acknowledges one of its assumptions: the boundary between Indian and mestizo. To this extent it reifies the myth rather than undermining it as a regime of truth. In post-Sandinista Nicaraguan research, the persistence of indigenous identity is understood through fairly conventional analyses of essential cultural traits and ethnic markers. Membraño Idiaquez (1992), for example, concludes that the persistence of ritual, traditional community organization such as the *consejo de ancianos* and the *alcalde de vara*, artisanal

production, and the institution of communal land are among those objectively observable traits responsible for maintaining indigenous identity in Monimbó and Sutiava. He argues further that "what has made possible the creation and recreation of a historical and sociocultural continuity between the present and the pre-Columbian past of the Sutiava and Monimbo communities is the persistence of *systems of clan and lineage-based kinship*" (1992:141, emphasis in original)

In the same volume in which Membraño's article appeared, Alessandra Castegnaro de Foletti (1992), an Italian anthropologist who has worked in Nicaragua, essentializes the pottery making of La Paz Centro as an indigenous "Chorotega" tradition. Such a position resembles the indigenismo promoted by Cardenal's Ministry of Culture, which was resoundingly rejected by the San Juanero artisans in the 1980s. The temptation to legitimize indigenous persistence in western Nicaragua through the identification of cultural boundaries emphasizes the profound entrenchment of the knowledge assumptions on which regimes of truth such as the myth of Nicaragua mestiza are built. Even Gould's work, which has turned the myth on its head, still relies on a sociocultural boundary line between Indian and mestizo which sets Indians outside the nation and mestizos within.

## Concluding Words

To decisively undermine the myth of Nicaragua mestiza would require local intellectuals and social movements to radically reconstruct the meaning of mestizaje and would thereby redefine Nicaraguan national identity for all the peoples within its borders. This is not the purpose of the contemporary indigenous movement in the western region, as I have shown. Thus the truths of the myth of Nicaragua mestiza and the self-confirming knowledge that it produces remain in relatively good health. A more equitable imagining of Nicaraguan national identity remains possible, however, as is demonstrated by the example of Latin American indigenous movements that do aim to reconstruct national identity. The activism and complexity of the work of local intellectuals such as Gamboa, as well as the insistence by the San Juaneros and perhaps other communities that their collective identity is not rigidly bound, may yet realize that possibility.

## Notes

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1. By "western Nicaragua" I mean the Pacific coastal plain, the northern highlands, and the interior plateau, which constitute the entire country minus the Department of Zelaya, also known as the Atlantic Coast. The colonial history and ethnic composition of the Atlantic Coast is utterly distinct from that of western Nicaragua, shaped by the former's historic incorporation into the British Caribbean and, later, the economic sphere of U.S. domination.

2. All translations from Spanish-language texts, documents, and interviews are mine.

3. *Indigenismo*, a term used from Mexico to Argentina, connotes reverence, usually heavily romanticized, for the pre-Columbian civilizations of Latin America. In postrevolutionary Mexico, indigenismo became official state policy and was implemented by bureaucracies dealing with Indian communities and artisanal production. The policies toward Nicaraguan artisans carried out by the Sandinista Ministry of Culture were directly influenced by the Mexican indigenista bureaucracy (see Field in press).

4. A violent rivalry between the elites of the colonial cities of León and Granada prevented the Nicaraguan state from coalescing in any substantive manner until the Zelaya regime.

5. Ramírez took this quote from Selser's classic work on Sandino (Selser 1958:248). The original manifesto was written by Sandino and dated July 1, 1927.

6. The entire text of this story is found in *The Grimace of Macho Ratón: Artisans, Identity, and Nation in Late Twentieth Century Western Nicaragua* (Field in press).

7. The National Federation of Indigenous Communities (FENACIN) and the Indigenous Black Peoples' Movement, of which Gamboa became the secretary-general, were rivals on the national level. Local rival organizations also surfaced, particularly in the Matagalpa region; Gamboa maintained his particular loyalties among these. In response to indigenous organizing on both coasts, the UNO government seated a representative delegation from several of these indigenous organizations in the newly created Comisión de Asuntos Étnicos y de las Comunidades Indígenas (Commission for Ethnic Affairs and Indigenous Communities), part of the National Assembly. As of 1995, the commission had done little to address the basic demands of the indigenous movement.

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