

RACE AND NATURAL RESOURCE CONFLICTS IN HONDURAS

The Miskito and Garifuna Struggle for Lasa Pulan

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Abstract: The Honduran Rio Platano Biosphere Reserve has become a place of struggle over natural resources. This paper examines a land contest between the Miskito Indians and the Garifuna, an indigenous group and Afro-indigenous group respectively. The area in question is Lasa Pulan, a one square kilometer of forest and farmland, historically shared by both Miskito and Garifuna collectives. Through discursive analysis, this paper traces contemporary discourse and practice that these actors employ to justify exclusive claims to Lasa Pulan. Such contemporary claims are structured by longstanding colonial and postcolonial racial ideologies that stereotypically label blacks as "immoral" and "violent" and Indians as "ignorant" and "backward." This paper argues, through analysis of Miskito and Garifuna claims to Lasa Pulan, that natural resource struggles are simultaneously racial struggles, and it acquaints policy makers with the multiple tenure arrangements in pluricultural Honduras.

INTRODUCTION

In 1958, on the north coast of the Honduran Mosquitia, the Garifuna village of Plaplaya challenged longstanding Miskito Indian control over natural resources. For almost four centuries, the Miskito had dominated natural resource access relative to other indigenous and Afro-indigenous populations in the Mosquitia.¹ As a result of rising tensions between the Garifuna and the Miskito over differences in planned land uses, the Garifuna sought assistance from regional officials to divide the communal area of

1. For the purpose of this paper I will refer to the Miskito and Garifuna as indigenous and Afro-indigenous peoples respectively. Reference to the Miskito as an indigenous group does not mean that I am erasing their African ancestry. Rather, the Belén Miskito strongly deny the Afro-indigenous label, and they both self-identity and are identified by the state, as indigenous (Indian) peoples. "Rights" under Convention 169 also grant indigenous and tribal people the right to self-identification (ILO 1989). I respect that here.

Lasa Pulan, a one square kilometer of forest and farmland located between Plaplaya and the Miskito village of Ibans. The Garifuna requested exclusive control of half of the area to protect agricultural crops against the Miskito cattle grazing in this, hitherto, common land.² Officials, with the support of Miskito and Garifuna representatives, divided the area of Lasa Pulan between these two communities, marking the new boundaries with a barbwire fence (CACRC 2002b).

More than forty years later, and long after Miskito villagers reportedly destroyed the fence, Antonio Vera, a native Garifuna farmer from Plaplaya, arrived in Lasa Pulan to work on his yucca plantation. Upon arrival, he saw three large cows trampling plants and eating yucca leaves.³ Frustrated, not only at this most recent destruction of his crops, but “for forty years of Miskito disregard for Garifuna farmland,” Antonio summoned three men to join him in Lasa Pulan. The men proceeded to kill the cows and then delivered their tails to Ibans. As the Miskito commonly allow cattle to roam freely between coastal villages, the news of the event united Miskito villagers from Ibans to Belén in outrage. And as expected, those Miskito who lost cattle immediately demanded compensation (Antonio Vera, personal communication 2003). In 2003, while villagers for both sides claimed tensions had abated, the debate over Lasa Pulan lingered.

This examination of the Miskito-Garifuna struggle for Lasa Pulan draws upon ethnographic and historical data to demonstrate how race and natural resource access are intertwined in Honduras.⁴ In this article, political ecology, a research agenda concerned with unequal power relations and the environment (Blaikie and Brookfield 1987; Bryant 1998; Peet and Watts 1996), interplays with critical scholarship on Latin America in order to reveal the legacy of historical racial ideologies embedded within the region’s contemporary socio-racial hierarchies (Medina 1997; Nelson 1999; Smith 1997; Whitten, Jr. and Torres 1998). To begin, this paper illustrates how Miskito and Garifuna livelihoods are tied to free access to natural resources in the Mosquitia. Access to the forest, however, is changing. State regulations restrict Miskito and

2. This boundary is marked by a large pine tree. For the Miskito, 1958 boundaries are imposed and thus, are continually ignored.

3. Throughout the research I heard many different versions of this story, from how one cow was killed to even how eight cows were slaughtered. Some Garifuna claim there were never any cows killed. I chose the story that I heard most frequently, from sources that I considered most reliable.

4. This paper emerges from twelve months of ethnographic participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and numerous conversations in the village of Belén. This paper also benefits from archival inquiry and formal interviews with organization and governmental personnel in the capital city. Names of participants have been changed to protect confidentiality.

Garifuna customary access and provoke land insecurities through the implementation of policy that favors ladino incursions to the Reserve. In the context of the struggle for Lasa Pulan, subalterns draw upon dominant racial ideologies to justify and legitimate natural resource claims. The apparent Miskito dislike for the Garifuna mirrors colonial and postcolonial accounts classifying “savage” populations and discloses how anti-black ideologies are reproduced in modern-day land struggles. In response to Miskito rhetoric, the Garifuna, in turn, discount Miskito claims and devalue their reliance on custom and “indigenous” identities. In sum, this paper argues that natural resource struggles are simultaneously racial struggles and thus, the manner in which indigenous and Afro-indigenous identities are racialized in Honduras shapes their access to natural resources.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This analysis of the Miskito–Garifuna struggle for Lasa Pulan is informed by the insights of a broadly defined political ecology. Particular emphasis in this popular research approach seeks inquiry into the interconnection of material, discursive, and cultural dimensions of the human–environment relation (Escobar 1999; Peet and Watts 1996). Specifically, political ecology speaks to how unequal power relations inform the distribution, control of, and access to natural resources at multiple political-economic scales (Blaikie and Brookfield 1987; Bryant 1998; Rocheleau et al. 1996; Stonich 1993; Zimmerer and Bassett 2003). The use of discursive analysis informs the exploration of power relations as articulated through language and practice in the relationship between people, natural resources, and the economy (Bryant 1998; Mackenzie 2003; Peet and Watts 1996; Rocheleau et al. 1996). Indeed, scholarship in political ecology acknowledges “struggles over resources are struggles over meaning and representation” (Eriksson 2000, 215).

However, notwithstanding its usefulness, political ecology rarely addresses the significance of race in natural resource conflicts. Instead, class and gender are prioritized over race (Blaikie and Brookfield 1987; Peet and Watts 1996; Rocheleau et al. 1996; Stonich 1993). Racialization, the process of assigning different values to constructed cultural, phenotypical, and biological characteristics (Anthias and Yuval Davis 1992; Dei 1996; Winant 1994) is often subsumed by, and labeled under, class and gender oppressions. In fact, few contemporary empirical discussions within Third World political ecology focus on the racialized aspects of local natural resource access (for some exceptions, see Mackenzie 1995; Vandergeest 2003), while studies engaged in the connection between race and political ecology in indigenous or black realms in Latin America are even more scarce (for an exception, see Sundberg 2004).

This paper seeks to interrupt the relative absence of race in political ecology and disclose the entanglement of race and natural resource access, particularly in the context of postcolonial Honduras.

Inquiry into this entanglement reveals that the state often plays a significant role in natural resource struggles (Peluso 1992; Stonich 1993; Vandergeest 1996). Contemporary state institutions, through the enactment of protected areas and contradictory practices of natural resource management, continue to reproduce colonial racial representations of local people (Peluso 1993; Vandergeest 2003). As “racial thinking was an organizing principle and a powerful rhetorical theme among colonial regimes” (Stoler and Cooper 1997, 10), the alleged neutrality of the state, embedded within liberal legal tradition, proves false (Urteaga Croveto 1998). Indeed, territorialization, as Vandergeest (1996) notes, is a process by which states work to control people and their activities through their enclosure in a given space. Within these boundaries the state arbitrarily excludes particular “types” of people and their concomitant actions, exemplifying the falsity of state neutrality. Similarly, racial ideologies embedded in intervening state policies, define groups as legitimate or transgressive in a given space (Delaney 2002; Durkheim and Dixon 2001; Radcliffe and Westwood 1996; Vandergeest 2003) and pose serious risks for indigenous and Afro-indigenous people enclosed within state-consolidated protected areas in Latin America.

Inside these enclosures, states often reinforce racialized binaries (European/Indian and ladino/indigenous) that continue to echo colonial classifications. Such presuppositions of “savage” populations served the ideological foundations of *mestizaje*. Socially and ideologically, *mestizaje* was designed to construct a new identity through the miscegenation of Amerindian people and Europeans, rendering Indian and African identities virtually “dead” and “invisible” respectively (Gould 1998; Nelson 1999; Medina 1999; Radcliffe and Westwood 1996; Wade 2001; Whitten, Jr. and Torres 1998). Ladino/mestizo racial constructions are posited upon and emulate the advantage of whiteness as “key to, and symbol of, social and economic ascendancy” (Bonnett 2000, 51).⁵ Hence, state nation-building continually relies upon the construction of the racialized “other” to advance a fictitious national image of racial and ethnic homogeneity (Medina 1997; Wade 2001). Whiteness is further employed as an indicator of civilization and development, not only within nations, but also in relation to Europe and the United States (Joseph 2000; Smith 1997; Tilley 2005; Whitten, Jr. and Torres 1998). While perhaps less explicit, the representations of “Indian” and “Negro” identities, and their miscegenation

5. For the purpose of this paper I use the terms *ladino* and *mestizo* synonymously to represent the different terms available for dominant groups in Central and South America, but the term *ladino* is specifically used in relation to Honduras.

continue to be blamed for undermining economic development and social progress (Whitten, Jr. and Torres 1998, 52).

MISKITO AND GARIFUNA LIVELIHOODS

In the territories now enclosed by the Rio Platano Biosphere Reserve, the Miskito and the Garifuna have peacefully cohabitated for over two hundred years. Scholars of Miskito history trace the origins of the modern day Miskito to a mixed European, African, and Amerindian colonial identity referred to as the Sambo-Miskito.⁶ In 1641, shipwrecked African slaves arrived to the Mosquitia shore and integrated with European and Amerindians to create the Sambo-Miskito (Bell 1862; Floyd 1967; Naylor 1989; Newson 1992; Helms 1971, 1977). Alliances with the British enabled this collective to monopolize the region's natural resources over other native groups such as the Pech (Paya) and Tawahka (Sumu) (Floyd 1967; Helms 1977). In contrast, the Garifuna, formerly known as the Black Carib, are also an Afro-indigenous group, who trace their most recent ancestry to Saint Vincent. On the coast of Saint Vincent, shipwrecked African slaves again took refuge amongst Amerindians, this time with the Island's Carib population. After the British deported them from Saint Vincent, the Garifuna, landed in Honduras in 1797 at Roatan (Gonzalez 1988) and established settlements in the Mosquitia in the early 1800s (CACRC 2002a; Gonzalez 1988).

Miskito and Garifuna livelihood strategies both depend on free access to natural resources in the Mosquitia. Plaplaya, the single Garifuna village in the Reserve is located roughly ten kilometers west of a strip of Miskito hamlets and villages in close proximity to one another; I refer to these villages collectively as Belén.⁷ In both communities, many villagers manage kitchen gardens or plant a small plot of land close to their homes. While the majority of Miskito and Garifuna livestock is held in agricultural regions south of the coast, many Miskito allow their animals to graze from village to village. On the other hand, the Garifuna in

6. Please note that Sambo (English) and *Zambo* (Spanish) both refer to the mixed race Afro-indigenous and present-day Miskito Indians of Central America.

7. The contest over Lasa Pulan has been most recently described as the Plaplaya-Ibans conflict (CACRC 2002a, 2002b). However, for this paper, Belén refers to the strip of Miskito communities that consecutively line the coast east of Plaplaya to Belén: Ibans, Cocobila, Belén and their respective hamlets demonstrate their solidarity as a Miskito union against Plaplaya as the Miskito feel it's their right, as *originarios*, to graze cattle freely along the coast (Belén Interviews 2003). Also, Belén is home to the Miskito land defense organization, RAYAKA, (*Rayaka tasbaya ra iwi main kaiki pawai india nka asla takanka*) meaning "life." This organization (formerly CVT) was a key negotiator with Plaplaya's *patronato* (village council) over the Lasa Pulan debate. In 2003, most of Rayaka's active members and its president lived in Belén.

Plaplaya secure their livestock to avoid crop damage. As one Garifuna farmer maintains, “village land is for agriculture and not livestock” (Predo, personal communication 2003). In addition to kitchen gardens, farmers from both communities practice rotational or swidden agriculture on forested plots located along fertile river beds (Mollett, field notes 2003). The Garifuna reportedly farm along the coast and up river in close proximity to the village while the Miskito farm a greater distance from the coast (sometimes thirty kilometers away) and thus establish second residences along rivers referred to (in Miskito) as *kiamps* (Mollett, field notes 2003). As subsistence farmers, fishing (particularly among Garifuna men), game hunting, the gathering of forest products, and the sale of small agricultural surpluses also supplement Miskito and Garifuna livelihoods (Gonzalez 1988; Herlihy 1997).

Purchasing power, however, distinguishes these communities. In Belén cash is earned primarily through male participation in the Bay Island lobster industry as men earn relatively large incomes as divers (*buzos*) and canoe men (*cayuceros*).⁸ In the case of Plaplaya, almost 25 percent of Garifuna households receive remittances of American dollars from relatives living and working in the United States (ODECO 2001).

Despite cash incomes, a free access to natural resources is tantamount to livelihood activities of both communities. In the words of a Miskito *buzo* “when there is no money, I go to the *monte*, in the *monte* there is life” (Ricki, personal communication 2003).⁹

Miskito and Garifuna cosmologies also dictate attachments to land. Many villagers argue that the forest belongs to God and cannot be “owned.” In practice, both cleared parcels and fallow land (*guamiles*) are designated as the inheritance of future generations (Mollett, field notes 2003). For the Miskito, natural resource access is linked to an ancestral past that predates both the modern state and the Garifuna in the Mosquitia. Miskito histories, embodied in the region’s forests are not only material but symbolic and provide a crucial space for reproducing Miskito culture (see Occhipinti 2003; Mollett, Belén Interviews 2003) and moreover, reaffirms that swidden agriculture is “the historical core of Miskito subsistence” (Dodds 1998, 2). For the Garifuna, claims to the land are also bolstered by their identities as a distinct collective, whose cosmologies tie them to this space before the establishment of the

8. In 2003, the Honduran government planned a moratorium on lobster diving for 2005. The government cited the growing decline of lobster (and conch) in Honduran waters and the unhealthy working conditions for *buzos* as reasons for the planned closure. In the event of a closure, *buzos* claimed they would return to the *monte* until other wage opportunities arise (Belén Interviews 2003).

9. *Monte* (in this context) is Spanish for agricultural fields and forests.

nation-state (Gonzalez 1988; Thorne 2004). Indeed, tenure security is tantamount to the protection of both cultures.

STATE-LED TERRITORIALIZATION AND NATURAL RESOURCE TENURE INSECURITIES

The struggle for Lasa Pulan occurs in a context of growing regional land tensions. In 1980, the Honduran government, funded by the United Nations' Man and the Biosphere Program, enclosed the eastern portion of the Mosquitia with portions of the departments of Colon and Olancho. This protected area was named the Rio Platano Biosphere Reserve and was subsequently designated a United Nations' World Heritage Site in 1982. Over the last twenty years however, the Reserve has become a place of struggle over natural resources.¹⁰ While landlessness grows in the southern and western regions of Honduras (Jansen 1998; Stonich 1993), agrarian and environmental policy encourages *colono* (ladino colonists) migration to the sparsely populated forests of the Reserve (Herlihy 1997).¹¹

Home to over twenty thousand indigenous and Afro-indigenous people,¹² the Reserve also represents an important resource to the state. State consolidation of this protected area is financed by the German government and is managed under the auspices of the State Forestry Administration (AFE-COHDEFOR). As the largest protected area in Honduras, the Reserve measures more than 800,000 hectares. In spite of its role as an essential component of the internationally recognized Mesoamerican Biological Corridor (Herlihy 1997), the state ultimately facilitates *colono* incursions in the forests and inside indigenous and Afro-indigenous space. In early 1997, in response to the growing deforestation inside the Reserve, the state conducted the subzonification project (*Proyecto de subzonificación*). Reserve boundaries were then augmented and the area was subdivided into three core zones, namely, the cultural, buffer, and nucleus zones (see figure 1).

Lasa Pulan is located on the coastal shore of the Reserve's north coast. The cultural zone (*la zona cultural*) has a population of 21,320 people, where 84 percent are Miskito and 5 percent are Garifuna. The Miskito and the Garifuna share the zone's almost 400,000 hectares with other indigenous

10. In the 1980s, the growing ladino presence inside indigenous homelands, gave birth to CVT, Comité Vigilante Tierras, a Miskito Land Watchman Committee that monitored the encroachment of ladinos from the mid-1980s to 1997 (Mollett, field notes 2003).

11. *Colono* is the Spanish word for colonist, pioneer, or tenant farmer. However, in the Reserve a *colono* not only is always ethnically ladino, but also perceived by native persons as migrant and illegitimate.

12. State protected areas and indigenous land commonly overlap in Honduras. In fact, 70 percent of protected areas overlap with indigenous and black ancestral territories (Martinez 2003).

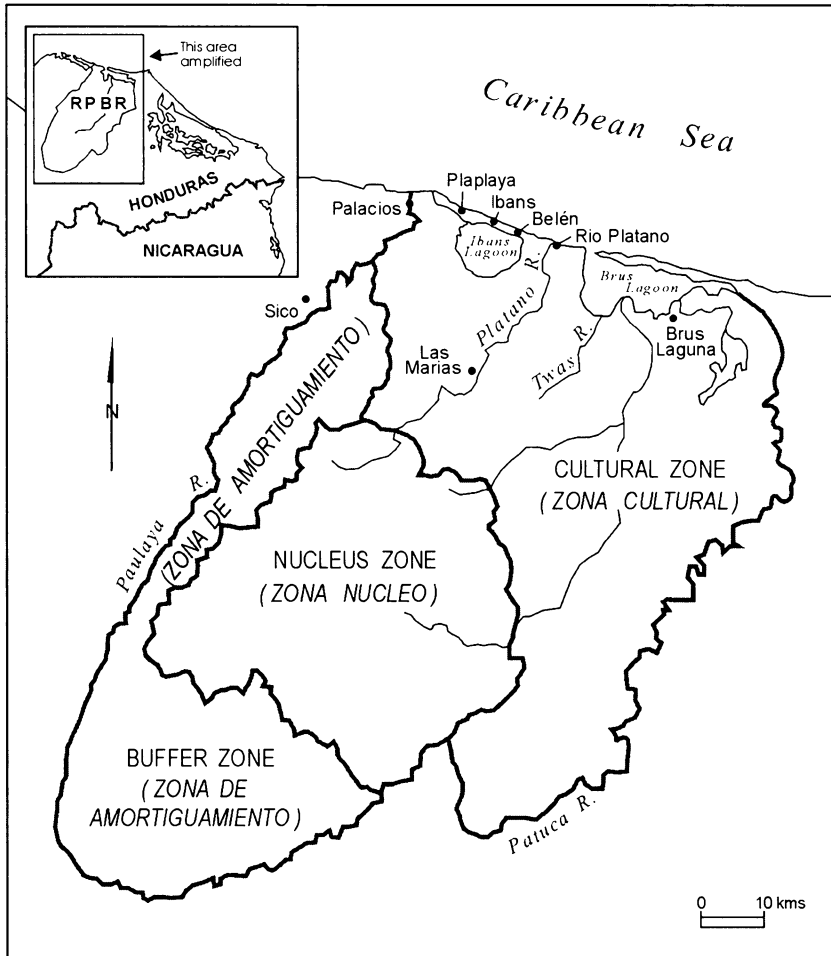


Figure 1 The Rio Platano Biosphere Reserve and Select Villages of the Honduran Mosquitia (Adapted from AFE-COHDEFOR 2000).

groups (Pech and Tawahka) and a small ladino population (AFE-COHDEFOR 2000). State forestry officials emphasize subsistence land use as part of El Plan de Manejo and state (explicitly and implicitly) that the Miskito and Garifuna, along with other indigenous groups, are not “interested” in market production (Enrique Luz, Project Official personal communication 2003; AFE-COHDEFOR 2000). Thus, subsistence production is encouraged through specific regulations governing cultivation with only occasional and small-scale commercial production permitted.

The buffer zone (*la zona de amortiguamiento*), located in the western and southern parts of the Reserve, has a population of 19,111 people

who are overwhelmingly ladino, and over the last twenty years have claimed individual parcels inside the zone's 200,000 hectares (AFE-COHDEFOR 2000). In part, this influx into the buffer zone is the result of 1995 agrarian reforms implemented by the National Agrarian Institute (INA).¹³ Landless small producers were invited to move to the fertile riverbeds of the Sico-Paulaya valley, which shares its western border with the Reserve. However, farmers far outnumbered the availability of land. Those excluded from acquiring new lands continued to move east. Migration, combined with a 3 percent birth rate (AFE-COHDEFOR 2000) has increased land competition. As a result, the Miskito and Garifuna now see an increasing number of colonos moving beyond the buffer zone and further east inside the cultural zone's indigenous and black domains.

This influx, while publicly criticized, is left unencumbered by the state. In practice, the state tends to favor colono presence and stimulates agricultural production in the ladino dominated buffer zone. According to a state official, "ladinos are more interested in producing for the market" [than indigenous people] (Luz, personal communication 2003). Furthermore, the Reserve's normative and legal frameworks, in addition to basic productive systems, facilitates commercial activities such as coffee, wood, and cattle production (Vallejo Larios 1997; Luz, personal communication 2003; AFE-COHDEFOR 2000), three of the nation's most lucrative exports.

Lastly, human activity in the Reserve core, as it is most "fundamental to the Biosphere" is strictly prohibited (AFE-COHDEFOR 2000). The state claims there are no indigenous people residing in the nucleus zone, yet, indigenous leaders caution that indigenous land use in this zone is well established. A practice that is now, according to El Plan de Manejo, normatively transgressive (AFE-COHDEFOR 2000; Edgardo Benitez personal communication 2003).

Complicating matters further, in 1997, INA assigned ownership of the Reserve lands to AFE-COHDEFOR (*Hablemos Claro* August, 1997). That same year, the state wrote the Reserve into the Catálogo del Patrimonio Público Forestal Inalienable (The Inalienable Public Forest Heritage Registry), which explicitly criminalizes the sale or transfer (of ownership) of Reserve land even among indigenous and Afro-indigenous people (Vallejo Larios 1997). While Honduran law prohibits more than one title per parcel of land (República de Honduras 1992), state

13. INA is the agrarian branch of the government with jurisdiction over all rural lands and land titling. In 2003, however, the government was undergoing changes to its land and titling departments. The fate of INA is currently uncertain (Mollett, field notes 2003).

officials insist they are now legally restricted from granting future land rights in *dominio pleno* in the Reserve.¹⁴

Honduras' commitment to the International Labour Organisation's (ILO) Convention 169, which obliges the state to provide territorial guarantees to indigenous and tribal people (ILO 1989) is ignored by Reserve officials. The transfer of Reserve lands to AFE-COHDEFOR also neglects rights under the Honduran Constitution that awards "ethnic people" the right to communal land titles in *dominio pleno* (República de Honduras 1992). While the Garifuna have already exercised these rights and have received a communal land title to Plaplaya, the Garifuna currently look to formally enlarge (*ampliar*) their communal area. The Miskito, distinctly, aim to legalize functional habitats (in addition to village lands) as a collective group of overlapping territories that extend beyond state models for "ethnic" communal village land titles. The land transfer from INA, however, erected a huge obstacle for residents seeking formal territorial protections. Moreover, village leaders insist that during the subzoning project, state promises of future land legalization encouraged their participation (MOPAWI, staff communication 2003; Vargas, personal communication 2003; TASBA, personal communication 2003; Wood n.d.). However, by 2003 (seven years later), the promise of property rights has yet to materialize.¹⁵

The racialization of indigenous and Afro-indigenous people grows more blatant. In 2000, with the release of the Reserve's El Plan de Manejo, colonos were formally recognized as "legal residents." According to the state, all persons residing in the Reserve before 1997, as verified through the 1997–1998 census, were permitted to remain (AFE-COHDEFOR 2000). Yet, state threats to remove any future colono migrants do not deter the flow of invasions inside the Reserve. In fact, many colonos feel more secure in new communities than in areas of origin (Mollett, San Arturo Interviews 2003). In contrast, Miskito and Garifuna leaders contend that their tenure insecurities have heightened as indigenous lands have been forced to absorb *nuevos colonos* happy to avoid the more densely populated buffer zone (Mollett, field notes 2003).

Thus, it was on that day in Lasa Pulan, in the atmosphere of growing tenure insecurities, fostered through racialized natural resource access, that Antonio Vera found Miskito cows destroying his family's

14. Some Miskito and Garifuna leaders argue that this is a deliberate move by AFE-COHDEFOR officials to deny rights in *dominio pleno*. Indeed, the deeds for the Reserve and the inscription in the Catalogo include addendums that express that the State's ownership of the Reserve should not deny indigenous rights to legalize collective territories (INA Resolution no. 140, August 19, 1997).

15. In 2005, the Reserve titling project had begun in the buffer zone (ladino) but has yet to begin in the cultural zone.

yucca plantation. Although Antonio certainly anticipated Miskito retaliation, he may have not anticipated how his actions that day played into a history of Indian and black racial ideologies that underpin natural resource access in the Mosquitia. Anti-black sentiment was reharnessed by the Miskito who employed racialized discourses to disrupt Garifuna claims to Lasa Pulan. At the same time, the Garifuna essentialized the Miskito as so-called "primitive Indians," "ignorant" of national law (Mollett, field notes 2003). In the struggle for Lasa Pulan, contemporary discursive contests disclose a history of racial hierarchies, and accordingly, make natural resource struggles and racial struggles congruent.

MESTIZAJE AND CENTRAL AMERICAN RACIAL HIERARCHIES

In Central America, ideologies of mestizaje continue to promise equality in a region that is born to rigid social inequality (Medina 1997; Smith 1997). Rooted in the myth of mestizaje are disguised attempts to compensate these populations with the constructed images of mobility and fluidity of identity that require the adoption of dominant cultural traits (i.e., language, dress, and production for the market). At the heart of this myth, all claims to indigenous identity and rights are construed as false (Gould 1998). Representations of the Mosquitia populations have long been defined as racially inferior primitives, classified, stereotypically, as indigenous "noble savages" or as "African tropical bodies" (Gordon 1998, 149). The degenerative elements of Indian and black identities were however inadvertently softened by, for example, Miskito associations with British colonialists (Gordon 1998; Hale 1994) and an active participation in the economy by, among others, Garifuna laborers during the banana boom on the north coast (Anderson 1997). However, notwithstanding promises of equality, it is a person's degree of whiteness, indigeness, and blackness, despite elastic meanings, that shape the rigidity of socio-racial hierarchies (de la Cadena 2001).

A history of ideologies associated with mestizaje accompanied by implicit racial hierarchies (white, ladino, indigenous, black) affect contemporary access to natural resources for indigenous and Afro-indigenous groups. The prevailing racial ideologies in the Reserve incorporate particular presuppositions of the colonial order that indigenous and black people would seem to contest. However, as Hale (1994) describes in the context of the Nicaraguan Mosquitia, "resistance to subordination generally involves the assimilation of hegemonic ideas" (1994, 202). These ideas serve as the rules of negotiation among these identities, and at times bolster ruptures between them (Hale 1994, 216). European notions of societal differences based on race not only serve as a basis for colonial power, but are revealed in the contemporary investigation of

the struggle for Lasa Pulan in the ways that “natives” call upon colonial ideologies of the Indian or black “savage” (Anderson 1997).

COLONIAL AND POSTCOLONIAL RACIAL HIERARCHIES

Miskito and Garifuna discursive claims to Lasa Pulan mirror racial discourses inherent in colonial and early postcolonial representations. Prior to the arrival of the Garifuna to the Honduran Mosquitia in the early 1800s (Gonzalez 1988), the Miskito Indians were considered the most “negroid” group in the region (Helms 1977). Far from homogeneous, colonialists differentiated the Miskito by the presence or absence of African ancestry which defined two geographically distinct groups. The Sambo-Miskito label referred to those native populations with “visible” African phenotypical characteristics and the Tawira (straight hair) Miskito were considered “pure” Indians,¹⁶ devoid of African admixture (Gordon 1998; Offen 2002). Geographically, the Sambo-Miskito generally settled in the region that corresponds to the present-day Honduran Mosquitia while the Tawira generally occupied the more southern Nicaraguan Atlantic coast (see Offen 2002).¹⁷

Colonialists of the late 1700s assigned different values to “African” and “Amerindian” ancestry in the Mosquitia. The following excerpt from a British colonial officer, Bryan Edwards, is explicit about the meanings behind Miskito categories.

Musquito Indians properly so called . . . [are] justly remarkable for their fixed hereditary hatred of the Spaniards, and attachment to us [the British], . . . the Samboes are supposed to derive their origin from a Guinea ship. . . . Certain it is, that their hair, complexion, features and make, clearly prove an African ancestry; from whom they have also inherited some of the worst characteristics of the worst African mind. . . . The pure Indians are so called, because they are free from any mixture of negro blood; Their modesty, docility, good faith, disposition to friendship and gratitude, ought to engage equally our regard and protection (Edwards 1819, 210–211).

As seen by Edwards, the presence of African blood, both for its inherently bad qualities and for the lack of “purity” among the Sambo, placed the Sambo-Miskito lower in Mosquitia racial echelons than so-called “pure” and “docile” Indians. British representations of the Sambo-Miskito however inadvertently, tended to mask the presence of African

16. The idea that a person can be racially pure is still common in the Reserve. Most obviously it is used to describe the imagined lack of race mixture a person may possess. In relation to the Miskito, a pure Miskito will speak Miskito and have two Miskito parents (despite visible African phenotypes).

17. The Sambo-Miskito grew to constitute the majority of all Miskito as of 1890 (Offen 2002).

ancestry by referring to these coastal people as Mosquito-men or Mosquito Indians (Offen 2002). For both Tawira Miskito and some British colonialists their imagined status as indigenous natives with “pure” blood and “fine” features made them “quite equal, if not superior to their neighbors” (Pim 1863; Offen 2002).

Spanish and American accounts, in contrast, highlight African bloodlines (Helms 1977; Pineda 1998). In the following passage by the Mayor of Tegucigalpa in the late nineteenth century, African ancestry is linked to Sambo-Miskito violence and hostility in the context of well-known alliances with the British.

The sambos have plenty of vessels, provisions, arms, and ammunitions, for they are supplied by the English of Jamaica, who egg them on to hostilities against the Spaniards. Their country is also a place of refuge for the mulattoes, Negroes, and other evil-doers who flee from justice in Spanish settlements, and who give them information of the Spanish plans, as well as join them in the execution of their own (Bancroft 1886, 600).

Later in the mid-1800s, the African heritage of the Sambo-Miskito serves as an ideological instrument. U.S. envoy to Central America, E. George Squier, highlighted blackness among the Miskito to discredit British presence on the coast and delegitimize the Miskito monarchy as “nothing but ‘puppets’ of British imperialism” (Olien 1988, 46). As foreign influence in the region was more and more shaped by North Americans in general and U.S. entrepreneurs specifically, Squier emphasized “Negro” blood in the Miskito, constructing them as “lost savages” in an attempt to erase native claims and British legitimacy in the Mosquitia (Anderson 1997; Olien 1988).

The low status of “African” or “black” identities appears congruent throughout the colonial Mosquitia coast. Gordon, in his discussion of Anglo Colonialism in Nicaragua, argues that despite Creole proximities to Anglo culture,¹⁸ and a relatively high class position in Mosquitian society, the Creole identity remained “stained by their Africanness” (Gordon 1998, 47). Whiteness, it seems, could only be owned by the truly British, while for the black, red, and brown inhabitants “white skins and civilized culture” remained the “objects of desire” (Gordon 1998, 45). Throughout the region, narratives of white superiority, both in phenotype and intelligence shaped regional racial hierarchies and became embedded in Mosquitia conventional wisdom (Hale 1994).

With the arrival of the Garifuna to the Honduran mainland, the African ancestry of the Miskito began to fade from colonial and postcolonial

18. Creoles or *Ingleses Negros* are referred to as English-speaking blacks in Honduras, the Bay Islands, and Nicaragua. Creole is not to be confused with *Criollo*, the (so-called) “pure” blooded descendents of Spanish colonialists born in Honduras.

discourses. Indeed in the latter half of the 1800s, the Miskito image transformed from “fierce warrior” previously maintained through endless raids and violent trading, to that of the “backward” and “harmless” savage (Gonzalez 1988). According to Helms (1977) the Miskito were increasingly referred to as culturally *indígena* by European and North American observers. In the late 1800s the label *indios selváticos* (forest Indians) referred largely to the Miskito inhabitants of the Honduran Mosquitia (Alvarado Garcia 1958; Barahona 1998). Subsequent to the flight of British settlers from the Mosquitia in 1876, the newly independent state, in its quest to incorporate the Mosquitia region into the nation-state, aimed their sights on civilizing “the wandering horde that roams in the forests of this department” (Alvarado Garcia 1958, 87). Through a program of religious missions led by the Moravians and government-sponsored Spanish education, the state sought a space to transform “forest customs” of the *indios selváticos* so as “to elevate [civilize] them to the category of men and citizens [instead of] Wild Indians” (*El Cronista*, April 21 1930, 7).

The social and cultural transformation of Miskito identities from blacks to Indians also coincided in part, with the displacement of the Pech and the Tawahkan populations from the coast spurred by Miskito dominance under British protections. As the Tawahka historically did not mix with foreigners (Bell 1862), with their retreat, the number of “pure” Indians along the shore was greatly reduced. In the absence of Pech and Tawahka groups and the growing arrival of the Garifuna further along the coast, the racial classification of “the ‘Miskito-Zambo’ as the most ‘Negroid’ element” was transformed (Helms 1977, 164).

Historical representations of the Garifuna or *moreno* (formerly referred to as Black Carib) were somewhat ambiguous.¹⁹ The growing Garifuna population on the Honduran north coast helped to bolster Spain’s demographic control and defiance of the British on the coast. However, not all Spanish authorities were convinced of Garifuna loyalties. In fact, officials feared that because the Garifuna shared African blood with the Miskito, a long-time adversary of the Spanish crown, the presence of the *morenos* on the north coast was dangerous. Indeed

because the Zambo Indians are also blacks, [being] children of the same (which is well-known), and will easily form an alliance with them as soon as they are connected through the mountains; and there will be nothing more than a single “herd” from the Gulf of Honduras to Cape Gracias a Dios. (Anguiano 1946[1804], 122–124. In Thompson 2004, 22)

In spite of these earlier worries, officials later came to look upon the Garifuna somewhat more favorably than the Miskito. In a report

19. According to Thompson, Garifuna populations in the early nineteenth century numbered roughly 4,500 (Thompson 2004, 22).

submitted to the Honduran government, after the withdrawal of the British, the Garifuna were described as “perpetually indolent and lazy” (Barahona 1998, 21) with regards to farming their own land, but at the same time, were “highly valued workers in woodcutting” (Zúniga 1938 [1875], 200, 203) and later became the “reliable laborer” for foreign fruit companies (Gonzalez 1988, 132). The Garifuna quickly gained the reputation for “industriousness,” a notion rooted in racial ideologies that encourage black workers in tropical environments (Anderson 1997). The ambiguous nature of Garifuna representations is contrasted with consistent Hispanic devaluation of the Miskito as the “laziest people that Nature produced” (Barahona 1998, 21; see also Thompson 2004) where nomadic activities, intelligence, and language of the *indio selvático* became presupposed as “backward” and lacking.

As laborers for the banana fruit companies, the Garifuna could not escape a growing discourse of black racialization in nationalist rhetoric. At the turn of the twentieth century, with the expansion of foreign-owned banana plantations, fruit companies recruited black West Indians (*ingleses*), who, because of their fluency in English and previous plantation experience in the Caribbean, became favored by companies (González 1988).²⁰ The expansion of the fruit companies was soon followed by a lively national anti-immigration discourse that explicitly criticized black labor on the north coast. Although, national populations distinguished Garifuna *morenos* from foreign-born *ingleses*, anti-immigration discourse racialized all black identities as a “threat to the nation” (Anderson 2000; Euraque 2003).

Ladino intellectuals and twentieth-century governments criticized the growing visibility of African identities on the north coast. Rhetoric describing the “threat of blackness” (Euraque 2003) did not merely aim to expose the injustice of foreign black workers in Honduras, but denoted that all black populations represented a “moral and physical” menace as a “race” (Anderson 2000). In an article in the popular national newspaper *El Pueblo*, intellectual Alfonso Guillén Zelaya cautions that “the black invasion in Honduras has displaced Hondurans in an insistent and humiliating fashion. Even worse, with this African importation, [Honduras] runs the risk of being a nation of mulattos for years to come” (Zelaya 1931, author’s translation).

This fear was formalized in 1929 when the Honduran government restricted the migration of *negros* to the country.²¹ Under the law of

20. The immigration of the *ingleses*, estimated by the British consul in 1914 to be 4,000–5,000, were employed by the United Fruit Company and Cuyamel Fruit, and an additional population of 2,000–3,000 resided in major port towns (Anderson 2000, 121).

21. The law also restricted other races identified as *árabe*, *china*, *turca*, *siria*, *armenia*, *palestina* and *coolie* identities (Euraque 1996; Anderson 2000).

immigration, negros were denied entry to Honduras unless they could pay deposit and entrance taxes that were realistically unattainable (Euraque 1996). Such a policy illustrates the ascendance and strengthening of indo-Hispanic mestizaje as the primary benchmark for national belonging (Anderson 2000; Euraque 1996). While the Miskito had slowly escaped (and rejected) the assignment of black identity labels (only to be racialized as Indians), both anti-Indian and anti-black ideologies continued to shape social-racial hierarchies. The accompanying racial discourse was not however exclusively owned by the dominant classes, but also permeated subaltern discourses.

MISKITO RHETORIC AND CLAIMS TO LASA PULAN

Today, in Belén, local ideologies around blackness help shape Miskito legitimacy in the Reserve. While the Miskito do not deny their mixed race origins (with Africans), they vehemently reject Afro-indigenous or black labels and use phenotypical and cultural differences to distinguish themselves from “true” morenos and negros. Not surprising then, the Garifuna are the most specific and frequent targets of Miskito anti-black discourse. From the Miskito perspective, the Mosquitia is imagined as a group of overlapping blocs of natural resources that belong to all indigenous people, among which they are the most dominant. The Miskito simply believe that their prevailing numbers and long history in the region authorizes their rule over Lasa Pulan. The current president of RAYAKA explains:

I am confused why there is any conflict in the first place; the Miskito have been here [in the Mosquitia] since 1502. We are indigenous to the Mosquitia . . . los morenos²² only celebrated their bicentennial in 1997. For me los morenos are not indigenous to this land, they are African.” (Danilo Avila, personal communication 2003)²³

In the above quotation, Avila reifies African ancestry among the Garifuna despite the fact that the Garifuna are also descendents of Carib pre-colonial Amerindians. With an emphasis on the “late” arrival of the Garifuna to the Mosquitia, Avila places them in a historical timeline that justifies the Miskito as the *originarios*, in order to refute Garifuna claims of ancestral ties to the land. African heritage among the Miskito, however, is rarely mentioned (Belén interviews 2003).

22. *Moreno* is translated as the dark-skinned ones, and became synonymous with *Carib* (from the colonial label Black Carib). Moreover, *Carib* is similar to the Miskito word for Garifuna, *Karibi* (Gonzalez 1988; Mollett, field notes 2003).

23. According to Nelson (1992) and Bell (1862), however, the Sumu (modern day Tawahka) were present when the British entered the region. Cultural contact with the making of Zambo-Mosquito did not happen until after 1641.

For Belén villagers, racial identity is repeatedly linked to place. The Miskito contend that Garifuna claims to Lasa Pulan misrepresent their history on the coast. A Miskito motorboat operator in Belén explains,

Los morenos have never worked along the lagoon or the monte . . . they just want to see what they can get [by challenging Miskito claims]. . . . Since they arrived, they have only planted along the shores of the sea. They are sea people . . . and we were here before [the Garifuna]. (Vargas, personal communication 2003)

Miskito customary history asserts that the Garifuna live from coastal resources whereby men fish and “return to the hammock before lunch,” while “poor” Garifuna women cultivate yucca, but “only in coastal plots” (Mollett, field notes 2003). Recently, the Garifuna claim to possess a fifty-year-old land title that, if authenticated, would prove their formal rights to territories south of the coast.²⁴ Nonetheless, Miskito imaginations assign the Garifuna as “coastal people,” and accuse those in Plaplaya of “trying to seize land they have never set their feet upon” (Baista, personal communication 2003). Since the title has yet to materialize, the Miskito contend this is another example of how the Garifuna falsify land claims. For the Miskito, evidence of their dominion over Lasa Pulan lies in its Miskito name. Lasa Pulan, which means “where the devil plays,” and according to Avila, is a name the Garifuna simply cannot claim.

The Garifuna do not deny that Lasa Pulan is a Miskito name. Still, elders in Plaplaya maintain that the land was offered by the Miskito to the Garifuna for farmland in the late 1800s (personal communication 2003), a decision only challenged recently (Mollett, field notes 2003). Nonetheless, the Miskito commonly discern that Garifuna claims to Lasa Pulan are malicious and expose them as “bad people” (*upla saura*), responsible for inciting violence as exemplified in the killing of the cows. Many Miskito use this incident to demonstrate the veracity of immoral and non-Christian behavior among the Garifuna (traditional Moravian Church Elder, personal communication 2003).

The following excerpt from my field notes illustrates how the Lasa Pulan struggle is both a material and symbolic consequence of racialized ideologies of Garifuna identities in the Honduran Mosquitia.

While visiting one of my Miskito neighbors I asked Luisa and her cousin Carla why Miskito people do not want to share control of Lasa Pulan. At first the women speculated, “some people just don’t like los morenos.” After a pause where the woman sat contemplating my question, Carla opined that Lasa Pulan should remain under Miskito control and recalls an experience she had with a Garifuna

24. I was assured this land deed did exist. However, in the six months after I was promised a copy of this land deed, villagers were also still waiting for confirmation of the existence of the title. I unfortunately left Honduras before Garifuna leaders located the title.

woman in Batalla. This experience helped her understand what she considers are the “differences” between Miskito and Garifuna people. She preempts her story and emphasizes that “these are the words of a Garifuna woman.” According to Carla, this woman wishes to marry a Miskito man because she doesn’t like her own “*raza*,” for “los morenos do not like to work” and the “Miskito [men] like to work in the monte.” The woman continues to explain that of her two children, the boy with a Miskito father is more likely to help his mother in the future, and to become more successful because the “morenito” (little brown boy) will likely be “black and lazy like his father.” The woman told Carla how she attends the Renewed Moravian church because the Catholic Church, commonly found in Garifuna communities, is unable to control Garifuna people as they drink *Gifiti* and dance *punta*.²⁵ According to Carla this woman praised the Moravian church for its strong influence over villagers and expressed how Miskito people are so notably humble and obedient. However, a few minutes later, a man approached this same woman to buy moonshine (*guaro blanco*). The Garifuna woman, Carla quickly learned, peddled rum and marijuana, and proceeded to make the transaction. Carla said she learnt by this experience how “los morenos live” and thus concludes that morenos are not Christians (*los morenos no son cristianos*)” and despite their need for the land, they do not deserve it more than the Miskito [Christians]. (Mollett, field notes 2003, 54–55)

Carla offers her story as evidence of Garifuna immorality as told to her by a Garifuna and thus must be “true.” In her narrative, race and class conflate. Carla reinforces regional racial hierarchies through her story of a Garifuna woman who seemingly values her more fair-skinned Miskito son over her “morenito” son because of a real and imagined higher earning potential and work ethic entangled with skin color and imagined bloodlines in the Mosquitia. From such “evidence,” Carla assigns the Miskito with stronger claims to the forests. In addition, she devalues two important cultural markers of the Garifuna (i.e., drink and dance), both of which are celebrated in Garifuna culture as they make *Gifiti*, a Garifuna liquor made of herbs and potent white rum, and their well-known *punta* dance (and music) is often performed by women and children for tourists. Yet, for Carla, the persistence of drink and dance in the face of the Catholic Church in Plaplaya offers proof of the enormity of “evil” in Garifuna society. Finally, Carla is left with the image of “how los morenos live” as she witnesses this woman peddle drugs and alcohol. This final detail is offered as evidence that the Garifuna are not Christian and thus do not deserve land (charity) from those who are, namely, the Miskito.²⁶

GARIFUNA RHETORIC AND CLAIMS TO LASA PULAN

The Garifuna contest Miskito claims with long-standing racialized discursive strategies that essentialize “Miskito” identities as “backward”

25. *Gifiti* and *punta* are two Garifuna cultural expressions that are popular with tourists and other nationals visiting the north coast beaches.

26. In Belén the majority of Miskitos define themselves as Moravian.

Indians. Pedro Lupo, a Garifuna and former municipal land official from Plaplaya, insists that it is tantamount that the Garifuna secure land rights because the Miskito are selling the forests and lands to colonos.²⁷ Lupo acknowledges that the Miskito preceded the arrival of the Garifuna but claims that Lasa Pulan has been common ground for over a century. Growing tensions over the area, he argues, are linked to the influx of colonos to the region (Lupo personal communication, 2003). According to Garifuna leaders, the Miskito are deceived (*son engañados*) by colonos offering cash or simply borrowing land for a small price. In the end, however, colonos ultimately remain on the land. Valerie Gomez, a Garifuna who heads the office of the municipal land registry, maintains that most of the land conflicts under her jurisdiction are the result of Miskito land sales to incoming migrant colonos. Namely “the Miskito are blinded by their poverty, and sell land, they sell cheap, and so in a month they have nothing” (Valerie Gómez, personal communication 2003). The Garifuna contend that while the Miskito may label them “lazy,” the Garifuna in Plaplaya are conservationists with a more intimate relationship with the land, a greater knowledge and appreciation of the forest’s value, and thus less likely, than the Miskito, to sell land to a colono (Lupo, personal communication 2003).

Making matters worse, Valerie contends, the Miskito are “Indians who try to live like ladinos” and sell their lands to accumulate wealth, but “they do not know how to manage money” (Valerie Gómez, personal communication 2003). In response to these criticisms, Miskito leaders acknowledge that a small number of Miskito have sold lands to colonos. Nonetheless, they maintain that colonos regularly purchase land from former colonos or simply usurp what they believed to be “unclaimed” territory (Mollett, field notes 2003). Still, the Garifuna argue that Miskito land sales are indicative of their “nomadic Indianness” with minimal attachments to the land, making reference to how the Miskito travel back and forth to *kiamps* up river (Mollett, field notes 2003).

Antonio Vera, our original Garifuna farmer, explains that the growing division between the Garifuna and the Miskito owes to a Garifuna consciousness of the power of documentation, while the Miskito, in his words, “continue to shout their oral history” (Vera, personal communication 2003). Others imply that Miskito tenure insecurities are directly linked to their regressive customary practices that fall outside the rules of the “modern” state (Marlin, personal communication 2003). Although Antonio admits once advocating for Miskito–Garifuna alliances, he laments that this alliance has limited land guarantees because Miskito leaders insist on demanding legalization for the entire Mosquitia (as

27. Frequent visits and conversations with villagers indicate there are reportedly no colonos living or working land in Lasa Pulan (Mollett, field notes 2003).

overlapping territorial blocs). Vera maintains that unlike the Miskito, the Garifuna understand that the state will never relinquish control of the country's "best forest." Thus it is necessary "to work within the confines of state policy" while simultaneously pushing the boundaries of such rules (Vera, personal communication 2003).

This strategy has had some success. In 1994, Plaplaya was awarded a communal village land title. Communal ownership, sanctioned by INA, gives Plaplaya *dominio pleno* for 233.75 hectares of village land. However, this land title fails to delimit Lasa Pulan within Plaplaya common lands and only states that Plaplaya simply borders the community of Ibans (INA 2002). Questions still remain regarding how much of Lasa Pulan the Garifuna can claim. Moreover, officials at INA in the department of special projects that oversee indigenous and Garifuna land titling, were unaware of any disputed overlap until years after the initial titling (INA, Director for Special Projects personal communication 2003).

Miskito-Garifuna relations have not always been so antagonistic. The grassroots land organization in Belén, Comité Vigilante de Tierras, CVT, currently RAYAKA, was composed of both Miskito and Garifuna members until 1992. With the birth of the Garifuna organization ODECO, the Organization for Ethnic Community Development, CVT was no longer a joint initiative. Shortly thereafter, led by ODECO, the Garifuna began to distance themselves from the commonalities between the two groups and focused on their rights to communal village land titles. At the same time, the Miskito dismissed Garifuna claims as an indigenous group, a strategy used successfully by the Garifuna for securing past land legalization (Thorne 2004). For the Miskito leaders, state formalization of Plaplaya's village lands, along purported boundaries aligned with Garifuna claims, is seen as delegitimate, squarely because "*los negros no son indigena*" (blacks are not indigenous) (Avila, personal communication 2003).

CONCLUSION

This paper demonstrates, through the lens of political ecology, how natural resource struggles are also racial struggles. Both the Belén Miskito and Plaplaya's Garifuna agree that the heated conflict over Lasa Pulan has quelled. Yet, the racialized rhetoric employed in defense of territorial claims persists. Miskito claims to control Lasa Pulan discursively (re) construct the Garifuna as *upla saura* and link their allegedly forged land claims to their African ancestry. Rooted within Miskito culture, the forest is a resource to be peacefully shared among natives (primarily Miskito) and not owned. The killing of the cows is not only perceived as a direct attack on Miskito commons, but the slaughter symbolically and simultaneously ignores Miskito cosmologic "common sense." The

Miskito decry Garifuna actions as a form of usurping property, and reify blacks as violent and immoral, and thus non-Christian.

In challenging Miskito dominance, the Garifuna essentialize Miskito identities as Indians. The Garifuna defend their claims to use and control their "half" of Lasa Pulan through rhetoric that depicts the Miskito as "backward" and "unconscious." The Miskito are accused of clinging to tradition and customary rights as originarios in a time where "paper not words" is becoming increasingly pertinent in land struggles (Predo, personal communication 2003). In addition, the Garifuna ridicule the Miskito for their insistence on customary laws especially in the light of lands sales to colonos. Implied in the Garifuna perspective is that it is by their own hands that the Miskito remain without formal rights.

The rules of discursive racial struggles in the Reserve are informed by a history of racial ideologies that favor pure blood, fair skin, Christian behavior, and links to the modern economy. Discursive claims to Lasa Pulan by the Miskito and the Garifuna (ironically both mixed race people) echo these colonial racial ideologies. Although the Miskito and the Garifuna draw upon "cultural and ideological objects of others inventions" (Bannerji 2001, 4) to make claims to the land, indigenous and Afro-indigenous populations also provide alternative forms of representation (such as the Miskito denial of African ancestry or the growing Garifuna identity as *afro hondureños*). These representations are richly embedded with cultural meaning and socio-historical context that today inform subaltern subjectivity (Bannerji 2001). The Miskito and the Garifuna may acquiesce to or resist dominant ideological constructions of them, and while they continue to use racist classifications for each other, contemporary racial discourses are "always" in reference to these colonial constructions (see Bannerji 2001, 4; Hale 1994).

Notwithstanding the local nature of this dispute, the Lasa Pulan contest reveals how the state is an active player in natural resource struggles, even if it is not directly implicated by local people. State territorialization via the Reserve's subzonification project and El Plan de Manejo fixed in place, through norms and regulations, indigenous and Afro-indigenous communities in the cultural zone and favored the movement of colono identities through different land policies, market opportunities, and the "rights" to claim space inside indigenous territories. Moreover, at present, state plans to grant formal "use rights" (*dominio útil*) in a controversial future land titling project in the Reserve has amplified tenure anxieties. For the Miskito and the Garifuna, state concessions that fall short of collective land titles in *dominio pleno* are unacceptable. As the destruction of colono incursions remain unabated, the Miskito and the Garifuna seem poised to set aside antagonisms and perhaps shift their focus from the current organization around essential racial and ethnic differences (nationally) towards a defense of their collective lands

as a geographically unified pluricultural group. Within the boundaries and in the context of a highly racialized Reserve politics, such an alliance is hopeful. As both the Miskito and the Garifuna recently purport, conflicts between a Miskito and a Garifuna “are mostly words [and ideas] but struggles for land with a ladino is for life.”

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