

Diasporic Intimacies: Garinagu, Creoles, and the Multiplicity of Black Indigeneities in Caribbean Central America

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Abstract

Within the last decade, there has been an effervescence of transnational scholarship on Afro-Indigeneity and the related concept of Black Indigeneity. In part a response to the widespread tendency to imagine Blackness and Indigeneity as discrete identities, several contemporary Black and Indigenous Studies scholars have reframed each identity and field of study as relational, mutually constitutive, and in many cases, overlapping. The intertwined history and present of Blackness and Indigeneity are perhaps nowhere more evident than on the Caribbean coast of Central America, where multiple populations of Black and non-Black Indigenous peoples have not only coexisted since the inception of modernity but have also engaged in sustained, interconnected struggles for social, cultural, and political autonomy. Anchored in conversation with recent interventions in Black and Indigenous Studies and in ethnographic research in Caribbean Central America, this collaborative essay reflects on the multiple, varied, and overlapping iterations of Black, Indigenous, and Black Indigenous identities along Central America's Caribbean coast. Employing the experiences of Garinagu and Creoles in Belize and Caribbean Nicaragua as case studies, the essay makes the case for a regional conception of Black Indigeneity based not on primordial or biological conceptions of Indigenous identity but on a historically contingent process of social and political identification.

Keywords: Afro-Indigeneity, Black Indigeneities, Diaspora, Ethnicity, Identity, Multiplicity

Introduction

Within the last decade, there has been an effervescence of transnational scholarship on Afro-Indigeneity and the related yet distinct concept of Black Indigeneity. [1] In part a response to the widespread tendency to imagine Blackness and Indigeneity as discrete identities with distinct socio-political histories and trajectories, several contemporary Black and Indigenous Studies scholars have reframed each identity and field of study as relational, mutually constitutive, and in many cases, overlapping. [2] The intertwined history and present of Blackness and Indigeneity are perhaps nowhere more evident than on the Caribbean coast of Central America, where multiple populations of Black and non-Black Indigenous peoples have not only coexisted since the inception of modernity but have also engaged in sustained, interconnected struggles for social, cultural, and political autonomy.

Both in the literature and in public discourse

on Afro-Indigeneity and Black Indigeneity in the region, the transnational, Central American Garinagu (plural for Garifuna) have often been heralded as the prototypical Afro-Indigenous group. From a biological and ancestral standpoint, this is because the Garinagu are the descendants of Africans who survived a seventeenth century slaver shipwreck near what is present-day Saint Vincent and intermarried with Indigenous Arawak and Kalinago people on the Lesser Antillean island. From the sociological perspective of identities as socially constructed and negotiated, this is because the Garinagu have continued to consciously articulate an Afro-Indigenous identity well into the twenty-first century, especially in the context of collective political struggle. While Garinagu identity has often been discussed as a kind of model for the reconciliation of Blackness and Indigeneity in the region, their characterization as singular and exemplary presents a troubling conundrum. On the one hand, and perhaps

unwittingly, it has tended to contribute to the ongoing anthropologization and folklorization of the Garinagu by freezing them into a biologized, primordial, and static identity category. On the other hand, it potentially forecloses discussions on the multiplicity of Afro- and Black Indigeneities in Caribbean Central America.

This collaborative essay seeks to explore, question, and begin to unravel the counterproductive bind of prototyping Black Indigeneity so that broader questions about Black Indigenous identities may begin to emerge. Anchored in conversation with recent interventions in Black and Indigenous Studies and in ethnographic research in Caribbean Central America, this essay reflects on the multiple, varied, and overlapping iterations of Black, Indigenous, and Black Indigenous identities in the region. In addition to engaging historical and contemporary constructions of Garinagu identity, we make a case for a regional conception of Black Indigeneities based not on primordial or biological articulations of identity but on historically contingent processes of social and political identification. The aim in conceptualizing Caribbean Central American forms of Black Indigeneity is less so to flatten differences among groups and more so to explore the political possibilities of a regionally rooted identity that extends beyond the individual and beyond the ethnic group. The impetus behind this regional meditation on Black Indigeneity stems from many conversations we have both engaged in about the nature of anti-Blackness in Belize and the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua (Caribbean Nicaragua), as well as about the meaning and function of Indigeneity as an identity category across Latin America and the Caribbean. In particular, we have been interested not only in the seeming incommensurability between Blackness and Indigeneity but also in the parameters that allow particular groups of Afro-descendant populations to be (and not be) recognized as Indigenous.

In what follows, we will discuss recent developments in Black and Indigenous Studies theory, review the colonial history of Caribbean Central America and the region's racial formations, employ the Belizean and Caribbean Nicaraguan contexts as case studies on Black Indigeneity

in the region, and put forth the argument for an expanded, regionally based understanding of Black Indigeneity. Our engagement with contemporary Belize and the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua in our analysis of Black Indigeneity in the region is tied not only to our personal and familial identities and connections to where our research takes place but also to the fact that both geographic spaces have historically been intimately linked. As such, they constitute a shared landscape and useful site for theorizing the interconnections and discrepancies between how Blackness and Indigeneity are deployed as categories of identification in the region. Both Belize and the Nicaraguan Caribbean Coast operate as spaces in the Central American Caribbean where multiple Black Indigenous and non-Black Indigenous populations live alongside one another. Additionally, both in Belize and Caribbean Nicaragua, the Garinagu have historically stood out among other Black Indigenous groups for their distinctive and simultaneous identification with Blackness and Indigeneity. Finally, Belize and Caribbean Nicaragua represent two locations on the Caribbean coast of Central America, and indeed throughout Latin America and the Caribbean, in which Black Indigeneity has been understudied. [3]

Theorizing Caribbean Central American Black Indigeneities

Discussions of Indigeneity and particularly Black Indigeneity are nuanced and multilayered. Black Indigeneity encompasses a wide range of subjectivities with regional, cultural, linguistic, and historical attachments. Our engagement with Blackness and Indigeneity in Caribbean Central America focuses on their various encounters and entanglements since the colonial period. Rather than reinforce concrete and singular definitions of Black Indigeneity, we center plural Black Indigeneities within the context of Central America as regionally based and informed identities. While the focus of transnational discourse on Indigeneity has historically tended to exclude Blackness and negate alternative ways of belonging to the land beyond primordial claims, Black Indigeneities in Caribbean Central

America have always had to contend with both ancestral and first-hand experiences of colonial displacement and dispossession. As such, we draw on an exceptional canon of foundational and emerging works from Black and Afro-Indigenous Studies scholars who take seriously the intersections and intimacies of Blackness and Indigeneity and question their supposed mutual exclusivity.

Scholars and thinkers in African Diaspora Studies have provided the language for us to think through the African continent as a point of Indigenous origin and descendancy for Afro-descendants across the globe. In a groundbreaking 2017 article “Why we need to stop excluding Black populations from ideas of who is ‘Indigenous,’” for example, writer and artist Hari Ziyad powerfully proclaimed that “Black people are colonized and displaced Indigenous people too.” Similarly, Afro-Indigenous Studies scholar Kyle T. Mays addresses Black and Indigenous historical convergences in his work. While Mays utilizes the term “Afro-Indigenous” to stipulate the transecting associations and relationship between African Americans and Native peoples, he insists that his own background (African American and Saginaw Anishinaabe) also encompasses an Indigenous root through his African ancestry (*Afro-Indigenous* 12). Our approach to Black Indigeneity draws on contemporary arguments about African Indigeneity to conceptualize Blackness as always already Indigenous; however, we diverge from an explicit focus on displaced African Indigeneities to meditate on regional Black Indigenous formations that arise in both the colonial and post-colonial place-making process.

Kyle Mays’ thinking on “Black Indigeneity” as opposed to “Afro-Indigeneity” is critical for us in this endeavor. In “A Provocation of The Mode of Black Indigeneity: Culture, Language, Possibilities,” Mays offers a reading of Black Indigeneity that is distinct from a focus on Afro-Indigenous ancestry typical of Afro-Indigenous studies (44). Instead, he theorizes Black Indigeneity as “a concept that explores how Black people have created a relationship to land in settler nation-states” (“A Provocation” 45-46), as well as how Black people “produce

culture and maintain the cultural elements that their ancestors brought with them in spite of enslavement” (49). While careful not to promote an understanding of Black Indigeneity that erases the presence and territorial relationships of non-Black Indigenous people, Mays gestures toward a theory of Black Indigenous self-making linked not only to Indigenous African ancestry and cultural survival but also to self- and place-making in the “New World.” We emphasize this conception of Black Indigeneity in our discussion of Belize and Caribbean Nicaragua while being mindful of the complicated nature of what literary studies scholar Shona Jackson has described as “Creole Indigeneity” in her book of the same title. For Jackson, the project of postcolonial nation-building in the Caribbean, particularly in Guyana, has been characterized by widespread forms of Creole nationalism and nativism in an attempt to assert a sense of racial and ethnic belonging in the wake of enslavement and indentureship. This has led to the ideological and physical displacement of (non-Black) Indigenous populations within the nation (Jackson 2).

Similarly to Guyana, Belize is a multi-ethnic, mainland Caribbean nation with a majority Black Creole population that tends to be overrepresented in national politics and government. The autonomous regions of the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua are likewise multi-ethnic spaces in which Afro-descendant Creoles wield more social and political power than other Black Indigenous and non-Black Indigenous groups. This is significant as it raises important questions about citizenship, belonging, and relationships to land. Like that of Kyle Mays, Jackson’s work encourages us to not only think about Indigeneity as strictly tied to place and heritage but also to engage with Indigeneity as a process that occurs in the colonial and post-colonial making of place and space. However, while Jackson’s argument that Black Creole belonging in the Caribbean is predicated on Indigenous displacement is useful for thinking through the complexities of post-colonial nation-building, we draw on her contribution regarding Indigenizing processes to explore the Indigeneity of Caribbean Central American Blackness without overshadowing the existence and experiences of non-Black Indigenous

peoples in the region. To do this, we take cue from Tiffany Lethabo King's theorizing on the relationship between Black and Indigenous Studies and Black and Indigenous people in the Americas. In particular, King's theorization of the geological formation of the shoal as a metaphor for how Blackness and Indigeneity converge is useful for thinking about the multi-racial and multi-ethnic geographies of Caribbean Central America (King 29). The shoal, which is not necessarily detained by the limitations of sea or land and their attendant associations with African displacement and Indigenous territoriality, respectively, provides the language and imagery to reimagine and reconceptualize the parallels and ties between Black and Indigenous life and being under conquest.

Scholars like Peter Wade have argued that Blackness has often been tied to the study of slavery and "race," while Indigeneity has been relegated to the study of "ethnicity" and land (24). The late colonial period in the nineteenth century is a prime representation of how Blackness and Indigeneity have been wielded in similar ways for nation-building projects, both in terms of state-based identity formation processes and Black, Indigenous, and Black Indigenous claims to statehood and resources. Wade argues that their "different locations in the colonial order, both socially and conceptually" situated the Indigenous as populations that were protected and exploited whereas Blacks or "slaves" remained at the bottom of the racial hierarchy (27). Although Wade explains that this was not always the case, as most Indigenous populations were subject to mass genocide and extermination, the shift from exclusion to being incorporated into the imagined Mestizx national identities of various Latin American countries held very real political consequences.

Juliet Hooker most notably gets to the root of how both Blackness and Indigeneity are articulated and mobilized to achieve tangible cultural and political rights in Latin America. In her essay "Indigenous Inclusion/Black Exclusion," Hooker explores the contrast in multicultural citizenship and rights recognition for Black and Indigenous groups. Those recognized as Indigenous have been able to better position themselves to claim ethnic group

identities given their recognition as having distinct cultures from that of the nation, while those recognized as Black or Afro-descendant are either seen as foreigners or second-class citizens who lack their own distinctive cultures (Hooker, "Indigenous Inclusion" 301). Thus, African descendants whose cultures have been subsumed under and appropriated as national culture are ironically marked as lacking cultural specificity in relation to Indigenous groups. This exclusion and erasure have played a significant role in the performance and articulation of Black Indigeneity and other forms of native belonging among Black groups in Central America, with the Garinagu case being the most visible.

Garinagu subjectivity in Caribbean Central America is decidedly marked by narratives of Black Indigeneity and maroonage. As Black Indigenous descendants of Arawak and Kalinago people from the island of (present-day) Saint Vincent and shipwrecked enslaved West Africans, Garinagu perform and articulate two concepts that are integral to our framing of Black Indigenous multiplicities in Central America: ethnogenesis and diaspora. Overlapping and multitudinous diasporic attachments influence how the Garinagu and other Afro-descendants in Central America negotiate ways of being and belonging. Scholars such as Joseph Palacio and Mark Anderson note how the Garinagu come to belong and navigate their Black and Indigenous histories within Black, Mestizx, and culturally pluralistic states like Honduras and Belize while highlighting how the Garinagu, through transnational and Black diasporic practices, disturb racial formations in the region.

Sarah England and Paul Joseph López Oro expand on these articulations through migration to the United States in ways that separate them from articulations via land rights. [4] Paul Joseph López Oro, one of the key Central American scholars engaging with Black Indigeneity through a Black Studies framework, notes in his piece on Garifuna diasporic belonging that "Garifuna subjectivity is rooted in dispossession and resistance to colonialism and nation-states. As such, Garifuna communities are fundamentally transnational with multiple homes of dislocation." (López Oro, "Ni de aquí ni de allá" 63). The Garinagu, as members of three diasporas—

Central American, Garinagu, and the larger African Diaspora—speak to their fluidity within places like Belize, Nicaragua, Honduras, and Guatemala. This analysis of fluidity, movement, and self-making has afforded us a framework through which to view other African descendant groups in Central America, particularly Creoles who also articulate various modes of being and belonging that parallel their presence in the region preceding the nation-state.

Colonial and Racial Formations in Caribbean Central America

The European colonial conquest of Caribbean Central America, which encompasses Belize and the Caribbean coastal lowlands of Guatemala all the way south through Panama, dates back to the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries when European pirates and seafarers first began journeying to the region. While Spanish conquistadors laid mostly nominal claims to most of Caribbean Central America in the early colonial period, it was British pirates, buccaneers, puritans, merchants, and officials that began to settle key areas of the region in the early to mid-seventeenth century, particularly the Mosquito Coast (present-day Caribbean Nicaragua, northeastern Honduras, and the Colombian archipelago of San Andrés and Providencia), British Honduras (present-day Belize), and the modern day Honduran Bay Islands. The British sought to achieve two key goals in the region: 1) to establish strategic trade and military relationships with Indigenous groups to advance British colonial interests and challenge Spain's monopoly in the "New World," and 2) to develop extractive economic enterprises dependent on enslaved labor (Offen 93). Intermittent attacks on English settlements by the Spanish who had settled Pacific Central America notwithstanding, the British were largely successful in their colonial endeavors. The alliance between the British and the Afro-Indigenous Miskitu of the Mosquito Coast, for example, led to an informal British colonial outpost in the region beginning in the seventeenth century. In British Honduras, a lucrative export economy in timber led to the settlement's formal declaration as a British crown colony in the eighteenth century.

Despite the fact that there were relatively few settler-colonists in Caribbean Central America in comparison to other colonial orders in the British Caribbean, by the early eighteenth century, British settler colonialism had taken firm root. Not only did the British wield most political and administrative power in settlements like the Mosquito Coast and British Honduras, but they also instituted slavery in the region to sustain their economic enterprises and exploitation of the region's natural resources. Enslaved laborers in both settlements came primarily from British Caribbean islands such as Jamaica, Barbados, and Bermuda. While Africans passed through what is now Caribbean Central America as early as the late sixteenth century on French and Dutch privateering ships, a permanent African presence was not established until formal British settlement in the seventeenth century (Kupperman 165). Many Black populations in the region today, particularly the Creoles of Belize, Nicaragua, the Honduran Bay Islands, and San Andrés and Providencia in Colombia and some of the Afro-Antilleans of Panama and Costa Rica are the descendants of these enslaved Africans who arrived on the Caribbean coast of Central America during the colonial period. Other sizeable groups of African descent include the Afro-Indigenous Miskitu of Nicaragua and Honduras; the Afro-Indigenous Garinagu of Honduras, Nicaragua, Belize, and Guatemala; and, perhaps most significant in terms of size, the descendants of Black West Indian immigrants who labored in the multiple U.S. enclave economies in the region.

Thus, the social, racial-cultural, and political formation of Black Caribbean Central America is rooted in the history of Spanish and British conquest and transatlantic racial slavery in the Central American isthmus during the colonial period, the expulsion of the Garinagu from what is present-day Saint Vincent in the late eighteenth century, and enslaved and migrant West Indian labor during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The historical and contemporary racialization of the Caribbean region of Central America is necessarily dynamic and relational given both the shifting nature of racial-cultural and ethnic identifications there and the existence of different Black or Afro-descendant groups. [5]

Though a significant portion of the Caribbean Central American population is of some African descent, a number of factors such as structural anti-Blackness and white supremacist ideals of *mestizaje*, or racial mixture, mean that some Afro-descendant populations in the region may not consciously identify as Black. Another set of factors, including the location of Blackness at the bottom of Central American racial hierarchies and the privileged position of Indigeneity in relation to the recognition of ethnic and political rights, means that Afro-descendant Indigenous groups like the Miskitu of Honduras and Nicaragua rarely claim an explicit Black identity. [6]

The Afro-descendant groups on Central America's Caribbean coast that have either claimed or been most associated with Blackness include the Garinagu of Nicaragua, Honduras, Belize, and Guatemala; the Creoles of Nicaragua, Honduras, Belize, Costa Rica and Colombia's San Andrés and Providencia Islands; and the descendants of West Indian enslaved and migrant laborers in Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, Guatemala, Honduras, and Belize. [7] These populations have for the most part self-consciously adopted and mobilized around a Black racial-cultural identity informed by their exclusion from and opposition to Central American nation-states and their national ideologies of *mestizaje*. Of course, this group of Black-identified Central Americans is not monolithic. Garinagu and Creole populations, for example, have at times distinguished themselves from and expressed "mutual disdain" toward one another, with the Garinagu designating themselves as more racially and ethnically 'authentic' and as never assimilating into European culture—given their assertion of having never been enslaved—and Creoles often racially and culturally discriminating against the Garinagu to bolster their higher and British-favored social status in the region (Safa 314-315). [8] An additional example is the way in which the Creole ethnic category has historically been a contested one given internal color and class politics and the assimilation of West Indian migrants and African Americans from the U.S. South into the group during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Gordon 66; Morris 178). It is with these complexities in mind that

we now turn to an analysis of Black Indigeneity in Caribbean Central America and the ways it has been imagined both historically and contemporarily.

As explored above, the colonial history and racialization of the region has been such that Blackness and Indigeneity have typically been perceived as separate identity categories with the exception of both the Miskitu and the Garinagu, whose accounts of ethnogenesis include pivotal moments of "racial mixing" between non-Black Indigenous and shipwrecked African groups. Much like the slaving ships that sank near the coast of Yuloumain/Yurumein (present-day Saint Vincent) in the seventeenth century and which were pivotal to Garifuna racial and ethnic identity, a slaver that shipwrecked off the Mosquito Coast in the late 1630s or 1640s has been described by some scholars as the moment of Miskitu ethnogenesis (Floyd 22). Afro-Indigeneity as a racial and ethnic category in the region thus seems to continue to be defined by biological conceptions of race and racial mixture between non-Black Indigenous and African/Afro-descendant groups. However, it is the Garinagu, rather than the Miskitu, that are contemporarily imagined as the quintessential Black Indigenous group of the region. This is in part due to the fact that the Garinagu have historically been depicted as a primarily Black group of Indigenous descent, as well as to the fact that they have often been differentiated from and represented as exemplary in comparison to other groups in the region.

Mark Anderson, for example, has noted how settler colonists like the British emphasized the "visible Blackness" and thus foreignness of the Garinagu in order to dispossess them of their land on Yuloumain/Yurumein (Anderson, "The Significance of Blackness" 22; 23). After their expulsion to Central America in the late eighteenth century, Anderson notes that the Garinagu "were still perceived to be phenotypically 'negroid,' or Black, but as different, exceptional" (27). In particular, the Garinagu were often depicted as quiet, honest, and industrious Black laborers in contrast to other Caribbean Central American populations like the "troublesome" Creoles (29). Moreover, even though the Afro-Indigenous Miskitu were also at different points in time

represented as Black in the service of U.S. colonial and imperial interests, the Garinagu were perceived to exhibit “decided contrasts with the Sambos of the Mosquito Shore,” namely activeness, industriousness, and providence (Squier in Anderson, “The Significance of Blackness” 31). Such juxtapositions with local populations suggest that the Garinagu were perceived as superior within economic discourses due to their recent arrival and “willing” participation in regional economies that local Black, Indigenous, and Black Indigenous groups had already been troubling and/or resisting for centuries” (Anderson, “The Significance of Blackness” 29; 30). At the same time that colonists and Western authors emphasized Garinagu Blackness and industriousness, however, they also continuously identified their “heathen” traditional customs, including their “‘Devil Feasts,’” “‘grotesque’ dances,” “practice of polygamy,” and syncretic religious practices as problems (30). These customs marked the Garinagu as racially, ethnically, and culturally distinct, and were central to Garinagu interpellation as a Black Indigenous group.

As historical analyses of racialization make clear, representations about Garinagu racial and ethnic identity have been a complex and contested process with political implications. A review of the colonial and ethnographic literature about the group reveals the myriad ways that their identity has been wielded as a political tool for colonial conquest and imperial expansion in Central America and the Caribbean. But a key question remains unanswered: how do the Garinagu self-identify? In addition to the centrality of Afro-Indigenous ethnogenesis and Black diasporic identification to Garinagu identity explored above, questions of land tenure and territorial rights have figured prominently in Garinagu conceptions of their (Black) Indigeneity. Indeed, throughout Latin America, and as scholars like Mark Anderson and Juliet Hooker highlight, land tenure has often been conditioned on a group’s ability to demonstrate a distinct cultural and ethnic identity. The groups that have had most success in this endeavor are Indigenous groups, as well as those Afro-descendant groups that have been able to trace, document, and articulate what is considered to be

an “autochthonous,” or “Indigenous-like” identity. Typically, this includes proving what Jennifer Goett has referred to as “chronological primacy or firstness,” meaning either a documented presence in a region or place before the formation of the nation-state or before the arrival of colonists in the Americas (Goett 289-290). It is within this context that Garinagu identification as Black Indigenous has been strengthened in the contemporary moment.

For example, in the Honduran context, Mark Anderson notes how before the Latin American multicultural turn in the late 1980s and 1990s, Garinagu activism had mainly been oriented against racial discrimination and segregation and the promotion of Black identity consciousness (Anderson, “When Afro Becomes (like) Indigenous” 392). By the mid-1980s, however, the principal Garinagu activist organization OFRANEH (Organización Fraternal Negra de Honduras)

had come to emphasize collective cultural, land and resource rights, to form alliances with indigenous organizations and to represent the Garifuna struggle within a framework modeled on indigenous rights... On the one hand, activists identified themselves with the racial term negro, as expressed in the name of the organization. On the other hand, OFRANEH sought to attach their struggle to those of indigenous peoples through institutional alliances. (Anderson, “When Afro Becomes (like) Indigenous” 392)

This suggests that in addition to biological and ancestral conceptions, Garinagu identity construction is closely related to the politics of place, community survival, and what Edmund T. Gordon, Galio C. Gurdíán, and Charles R. Hale have called “the social memory of struggle” (373). As such, Garifuna identity is not static but malleable and has the potential to shift according to social and political needs. This is true not just for the Garinagu, but for all Black Caribbean Central American groups who may have secured national rights and recognition as autochthonous populations but have yet to explicitly be recognized as Indigenous.

In the twenty-first century under the context of what Charles R. Hale has described as neoliberal multiculturalism, the Garinagu continue to assert their Black Indigeneity and right to cultural and territorial sovereignty. [9] Christopher Loperena elucidates, for example, how Garinagu in post-coup Honduras proclaim their autonomous rights through cultural performance and the promotion of Garinagu cultural practices such as their language, distinct style of dress, and coastal way of life. Loperena calls this performance of ethnic difference the “double-bind” of Garinagu ethopolitics: by mobilizing state-recognized symbols of Garinagu ethnoracial identity and “authenticity” such as punta music, the Garinagu flag, headwraps, and distinctive linguistic practices and chants in order to articulate their autonomous political desires, Garinagu performance at times unwittingly “reproduces folkloric representations of Garifuna subjectivity” (Loperena, “Radicalize Multiculturalism?” 519). Garinagu performance of racial and ethnic authenticity has only been magnified by the recognition of their culture by international organizations like UNESCO as rare and exceptional. On May 18, 2001, UNESCO proclaimed Garifuna language, music, and dance as a “Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity.” Moreover, the annual Garifuna Settlement Day celebration and public holiday that takes place in Belize, Honduras, Guatemala, and Nicaragua is another key example of how the Garinagu perform and construct their ethnoracial identity and ethnogenesis story as one that is exceptional and distinctive in Caribbean Central America.

While the Garinagu are indeed a people with a unique history, culture, and racialized experience whose ethnoracial performance has yielded important social and political gains, it is important to note that they are far from alone in their status, performance, and self-identification as Black Indigenous and autochthonous peoples. In fact, the heralding or prototyping of the Garinagu as Caribbean Central America’s quintessential Black Indigenous group encourages analysis of other performances of Black Indigeneity in the region from groups who might not be explicitly recognized as such, such as Belizean and Nicaraguan Creoles. In the following sections,

we turn to Belize and the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua as important case studies in the recognition of the multiplicity of Black Indigenous articulations in the region. In particular, we argue that other Black Caribbean Central American groups such as the Creoles engage in complex processes of Black Indigenous identity construction. In making this argument, we conceive of Indigeneity less so as an inherited, biological status or condition, and more so as a socially constituted and constructed process of belonging and becoming.

Black and Indigenous Configurations in Belize

In *Beka Lamb*, a novel written by Belizean author Zee Edgell at the height of the Belizean independence movement, the main character Beka inquires about the differences and assumed tensions between Creoles and “Caribs.” Her mother replies:

“To tell you the truth, Beka, I don’t rightly know. I doubt if many creoles could tell you. Nobody really remembers the reasons. We creoles are so different, one from the other, that it’s hard for us to mix properly amongst ourselves, let alone among Carib people who have a lot more things in common. Maybe it’s because Carib people remind us of what we lost trying to get up in the world.” (Edgell 70)

In expounding on intimate understandings of ethnicity and identity in Belize, the book demonstrates the multitudinous and overlapping articulations of Blackness and self-making. The reasoning that Beka’s mother provides as to why “Creole and Carib don’t mix too much” adds to a complicated history of anti-Blackness in formerly British Honduras that privileges (and still does to this day) Creoleness as a more “westernized” form of being and Garinagu as an already shunned and foreign group (609). Further, the explanation that Creoles have “lost” parts of their culture, identities, and history while navigating the colonial system in Belize speaks to central discussions of post-emancipation

Caribbean societies and creolization. Beka's mother pushes us to think about Black and Black Indigenous identity in Belize within a context of diaspora and Indigeneity. An absence of origin and tradition does not negate Indigenous or African origin but rather forces us to think deeply about how Blackness and Black Indigeneity are articulated in Belize and broader Caribbean Central America (Mays, *Afro-Indigenous* 23). Creole identity and culture within the context of Central American Blackness and Black identity in Belize are articulated as either relational or in opposition to other modes of Blackness and belonging. [10] To understand how Blackness and Indigeneity influence Belizean racial formations, one must examine how Belize fits into the Central American region and wider circum-Caribbean.

To understand how Black Belizeans (both Creole and Garinagu) and African descendants in the isthmus navigate global and local worlds, it is essential to understand historical configurations of Blackness and Indigeneity. Because Belize has experienced multiple movements within and outside its borders, it has been able to construct itself as a pluralist society. With the arrival of Europeans in the region in the sixteenth century, the Indigenous population declined significantly, and as West Indian and African enslaved labor became available in the settlement in the late seventeenth century, few British landowners claimed to be the "primary occupants of the land" (Shoman 268). In the next few centuries, Garinagu, Maya refugees, and East Indian and Asian settlers contributed to a geographically contextualized coexistence (Bolland). Through understandings of identity, culture, and representation throughout the region, Belize defines itself via the state amidst these geopolitical histories.

As both Belizean Creoles and Black Indigenous Garinagu claim disparate forms of Blackness and Indigeneity that are not necessarily bound by the other, a Black Belizean identity offers immense possibilities for thinking through multiple Blacknesses and Indigeneities within a singular framework. Despite the fact that Blackness in Belize is a product of local and regional histories of enslavement and state navigation, it is also simultaneously a product

of transnational and diasporic identities that have been constructed over time and space. Our interest is in the lived experiences and cultural expressions that emerge from modern human and global hierarchies. As seen through the Garinagu and Creole cultures, Blackness in Belize as a sociopolitical category goes beyond historical and political conceptions of Blackness that also develops and lives as a set of meanings. Besides being one of many Black sites in Central America, Belize also happens to be multicultural and multi-ethnic while being rooted in African and Indigenous traditions. The Garinagu's Black Indigeneity derives from their rebellious status of evading enslavement in the New World. Their dispossession and dispersal throughout the Americas produce a Garinagu subjectivity and community that is always in movement with multiple homes of dislocation. As descendants of enslaved Africans, free coloreds and European settlers, Creole identity has now been interpolated as a mixture of various ethnic groups in Belize. It is also understood to be anyone of mixed Black heritage that is not Garinagu, with Black serving as the primary base of all Black non-Garinagu mixtures. Both Garinagu and Creole histories, culture, and subjectivities intersect, and their similar articulations of what it means to be Black in Belize are also collectively shared and performed. This poses several questions pertaining to how the Garinagu have been able to maintain an Indigenous status given multiple movements and migrations across the Caribbean and to the United States. Whereas Garinagu Indigeneity is rooted in movement and dislocation from the Indigenous space of Saint Vincent, this can also be understood as an outcome of diasporic movement in Black Caribbean Central American communities, particularly among the Creoles.

Creole articulations that consist of movement, language, and cultural traditions are not necessarily read as Indigenous, even as they share fairly similar cultural traditions with the Garinagu. Apart from both groups sharing a Black African ancestral identity, Creoles are not solely confined to urban spaces and populated locations like Belize City. This is important to state as we have previously contended that Black Indigeneities in Central America and

their relationship to place are nuanced and fluid. Melissa Johnson in her work on Creole becoming as manifested through attachment to the natural world demonstrates how Belizean Creoles have also been intimately tied to the environment. As Johnson notes, rural Belizean Creole racial identity represents a specific racial formation that both adhered to and challenged racial constructions (598). Creoles who were relegated to enslaved labor that consisted of felling logwood and mahogany, were critical to the racial formation of Creoles in Belize, and also “made life” and engendered a specific Creoleness attached to natural environment and ownership. The iconography of the “bush” as associated with backwardness and “Black African ‘racial’ roots” also fulfilled a specific type of Creole Black identity that we argue can be seen as perpetually local and restricted to limited landscape. Furthermore, the rural Creole figure, even though varying in class, gender, and skin-complexion is also seen as a source of legitimate African continuity. [11] Although we engage with an Indigeneity that is not always attached to land and land claims, we acknowledge that Creoles share relationships to land both as displaced Africans and as stewards of the land. Centering these contentious relationships to land requires us to engage with a Black Belizean identity prior to Garinagu arrival in 1802 and how this has impacted the way Creoles constructed a sovereign identity as former colonial subjects.

Despite continuous shifts in Garinagu identities that coincided with their arrival to various Central American nation-states, Joseph Palacio notes that the adoption and reclaiming of an Indigenous identity that existed prior to exile was self-defined and self-acquired in the late 1980s (Palacio 30). The ethnogenesis of the Garinagu in Belize can be traced to their arrival to southern Belize on November 19, 1802. As portrayed in popular representations and depictions of Garinagu history, lived experience, Blackness and Indigeneity, the group is both displaced and native at the same time. National holidays like Garifuna Settlement Day commemorate the Garinagu’s pilgrimage from Saint Vincent to southern Belize and serve as a performative space to invoke ancestral memory, maroonage, and exile. Garinagu ethnogenesis

can be described in both Saint Vincent and post-Saint Vincent periods as an important marker of Garinagu being that entails a hybridity connecting them to African, Arawak and Carib/Kalinago Indigenous formations. Creole ethnogenesis, although most commonly supplanted by the Battle of Saint George’s Caye (September 10th) and the admixture of enslaved Africans and British settlers, the African roots of Creole identity is subtly acknowledged in dominant interpretations of the group. The establishment of Creole identity-based organizations like the National Kriol Council is less focused on associations with the colonial white elite and more dedicated to the preservation and unearthing of Creole culture and the Kriol language (Figure 1). Similar to the Garinagu, Creoles have in relatively recent years articulated their ethnogenesis and identities around language, cultural production, and an emphasis on cultural-ethnic roots. [12] Whereas the Garinagu transcend the nation-state, we argue that Creoles have a strategic and antecedent relationship with the modern Belizean-state that encompasses a specific type of peoplehood that also centers reclamation and preservation. While the Garinagu have articulated an Afro-Indigeneity through language, culture, and a historical account of origin separate from the Belizean nation, this serves as a framework for engaging Afro-Indigeneity and self-making across various Black groups in the region.

The Kriol Council, for example, works closely with Creole communities in Gales Point Manatee, an older Creole Belizean village 23 miles west of Belize City, with the support of the National Institute of Culture and History (NICH). As one of the oldest maroon communities in Belize, Gales Point was formed by enslaved Africans fleeing Belize Town and then Belize City. This history has led Gales Point residents to refer to themselves as the original Creoles (Africans) in Belize. In addition to this specific movement, Creole traditions in Gales Point include celebrating Bram or ‘Bramming’, a traditional Creole festive celebration beginning on Christmas day. During this celebration, members of the community dance from house to house, share homemade wines, black cake, and other treats. It is the performance of the Sambai fertility dance that is most recognizable as part

of the Gales Point Manatee Creole tradition. A rhythmic storytelling and dance performance rooted in African traditions, Sambai occurs during full moons, weddings, and birthdays. Dance is often accompanied by Brukdown music, a genre of Belizean Creole rural folk music based on storytelling, call-and-response, African syncopated rhythms, and European instrumentation.

Leela Vernon (Lila Genus Martinez) is regarded as a Belizean cultural icon for her contributions to the preservation of Creole culture in Belize, as well as being the “Queen of Brukdown” and a National Hero. Her Creole identity is based on a cultural education and heritage that is distinctly African and Belizean. Despite being born in a disputed border region between British Honduras and Guatemala, Vernon’s material attachment and legal non-attachment to the nation exemplify the in-betweenness of Blackness and Indigenous identity in her early years as a result of territorial conflict. Additionally, her marooned Creole heritage and Mayan heritage from her father (her mother’s father migrated from Jamaica to Belize via United Fruit) situate her both as African and Indigenous. In the context of Joseph Palacio’s engagement with Garinagu identity as a result of both admixture and geography, these two elements of Leela’s biography are particularly significant. A combination of these factors indicates the various connections she has to Blackness and Indigeneity that are situated outside of the Garinagu in Belize and beyond in Central America. Leela is most known for her song, “*Ah Waahn Noa Hoo Seh Kriol Noh Ga No Kulchal* I want to know who said Creoles don’t have culture?”, a Creole anthem. This widely used Creole expression, as depicted on t-shirts and bumper stickers, is used as a battle cry by Belizean Creoles who are faced with cultural exclusion in Belizean multicultural projects. The presentation of Black Belizean culture and identity, particularly in tourist projects, is often folklorized or flattened. Indigenous Maya and Black Indigenous Garinagu are not only the focus of most anthropological studies of ethnicity and identity in Belize (Blackness and Indigeneity), but also the target for attracting tourists. While Black and Indigenous identities and communities are shaped by self-making and

preservation, the state also defines who gets to make claims to Indigeneity.

Vernon’s song not only represents her life-long efforts as a cultural preservationist and Creole advocate, but it is also part of a broader and contentious process of racialization in Belize. Dressed in traditional Creole attire and wearing beautiful head wraps that hold her long dreadlocks, Vernon’s performances are a visual manifestation of her devotion to Belize and Creole identity and culture (Figure 2). After learning more about her “African roots and heritage,” Vernon felt that it was her national duty to empower the next generation of Creole people to become more confident and comfortable as they navigate Belizean society. Through the publication of the Kriol-translated Bible and a Kriol language dictionary, Vernon’s work with the Kriol Council included language standardization. [13] In connection to Vernon’s translation and performance of the Belizean National Anthem into Kriol, the Garinagu have produced a similar version. The Garifuna language has been a defining characteristic and a symbol of their marooned existence. Just as language is utilized by the Garinagu to articulate a Black Indigeneity, Creoles often use Kriol in a similar fashion. Despite the fact that Kriol is not used to make land claims or embrace an Indigenous identity in the Americas, such expressions of authentic and traditional Creoleness speak to an active reclamation of African belonging and Indigeneity within a similar framework. Furthermore, in its capacity as the *lingua franca* of the country, the Kriol language is a language that binds and is usually the first language spoken by the Garinagu, Mayans, Mestizxs and various other ethnic groups in the country. Despite the similarities in how Creole, Mayan and Garifuna languages are articulated, Kriol as a language is not considered in an equal manner due to its accessibility (spoken by the majority of Belizeans) and association with the state (a *lingua franca*). With Vernon’s untimely passing in 2017, celebrations have been held both as a tribute to her dedication to preserving Creole culture and as a lament for the loss of an ephemeral, yet very “rich” legacy. Just as the Garinagu have been accused of appropriating an Indigenous identity that is not “truly theirs,” their

strategic and successful appeals to Indigeneity through the cultural realm provide an example of what occurs when land claims fail. This specific type of being and belonging contributes an invaluable framework for how other Creoles and Black populations in Central America and across the diaspora navigate belonging and sovereignty.



Figure 1. The National Kriol Council in Belize City. The Creole proverb 'wan wan okro ful baaskit', which translates to "little by little we will reach our goal" is posted on the councils' marquee. Photo courtesy of Belize in America Facebook Page.



Figure 2. Leela Vernon
Photo Courtesy of Ambergris Caye, Belize

Black Indigeneity on the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua

A racially and ethnically diverse region accounting for approximately 50 percent of the national territory, the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua (or Mosquito Coast, as it was formerly known) is a region that is historically, geographically, culturally, and demographically distinct from predominantly Mestizx, or Indo-Hispanic, Pacific and central Nicaragua. From the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries, the region was a British protectorate that experienced intermittent periods of semi-autonomous governance by Black and Indigenous groups, namely the Creoles and the Miskitu. It was not until the region was militarily annexed in 1894 that it officially became part of Nicaragua (Goett 21). The occupation and colonization of the Mosquito Coast at the hands of the Nicaraguan state was a watershed moment for Black and Indigenous politics as it set the stage for virtually all forms of Black and Indigenous organizing that has taken place since. In the face of raced, gendered, and classed political exclusion, invisibilization, and assimilation, Black and Indigenous groups in Caribbean Nicaragua have drawn on the tenets of civic nationalism to seek redress from the Nicaraguan state for the violences they have historically experienced. One of the primary mechanisms through which they have been able to undertake this organizing is Nicaragua's multicultural citizenship regime.

In 1987, after several years of armed conflict between the Nicaraguan Sandinista government and the Miskitu (and to a lesser extent Creoles), Nicaragua adopted a new multicultural constitution and Autonomy Statute (Law 28) that not only recognized the diverse, multi-ethnic, and multicultural nature of Nicaragua but also guaranteed special collective rights for the Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities of the Caribbean Coast. These included the right to communal lands, to the region's natural resources, to language and culture, to autonomous forms of social organization and administration of local affairs, and to a regime of regional autonomy with two multiracial and multi-ethnic self-governing regions (the North

Atlantic Autonomous Region [RAAN] and the South Atlantic Autonomous Region [RAAS]) (Hooker, "Negotiating Blackness" 272-273). While various scholars have rightly emphasized Nicaraguan multiculturalism's serious flaws and limitations, it has nevertheless played a significant role in the articulation of racial and ethnic identities in Caribbean Nicaragua. This is in no small part due to expectations around racial and ethnic authenticity and static identities in determining who is and is not deserving of collective rights. While certainly problematic, the "dialectical relationship between rights and identities" in Nicaragua provides useful insights into racial and ethnic identities on the Caribbean Coast, including the politics of Black Indigeneity in the region (264).

Apart from the Mestizxs who have been migrating to the Caribbean Coast since it was annexed to Nicaragua in 1894 (Hooker, "Negotiating Blackness" 271), the five officially recognized ethnoracial groups that have historically inhabited the region are divided into two categories: Indigenous and Afro-descendants, the latter of which are referred to as "ethnic communities" in Nicaraguan multicultural legislation (Goett 219). Among those categorized as Indigenous are the Miskitu, Mayangna, and Rama, while those categorized as Afro-descendant, or "ethnic," include the Creoles and the Garinagu. Nicaraguan multicultural policies grant Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities the same collective rights to preserve their land and culture (Hooker, "Negotiating Blackness" 268). As scholars of Black and Indigenous land rights in Nicaragua have noted, however, collective land rights "are often conceived of and advanced within a legal, political, and cultural framework that is structured around current international notions of indigenous rights and identity" (Goett 220). This has led to a process in which, in order to be granted special collective rights, Afro-descendant communities must focus on and demonstrate an Indigenous-like ethnic identity that is different from the culture of the national majority, often at the expense of their experiences with racial discrimination and political exclusion (Hooker, "Indigenous Inclusion" 291). This includes placing emphasis on ancestral traditions and distinctive cultural

attributes such as native languages, as well as the historical occupation and communal use of land and natural resources (Goett 14).

While much of the literature on Nicaraguan multicultural rights has acknowledged and critiqued the ways in which multicultural legislation reifies and reproduces dominant racializations and racial boundaries, much less has been written on Black performances of Indigeneity in Caribbean Nicaragua. These processes are important to understand given that they are a key method of Black social and political struggle in the region. Despite the neat and binary separation of Black and Indigenous identities under Nicaraguan multiculturalism, for example, the Garinagu are popularly understood to be both a Black and Indigenous group not only due to their ancestral history and origin story but also to their performance of culture and tradition. In the contemporary moment, and as a result of more than a century of forced assimilation into both the Nicaraguan Mestizx nationalist nation and Creole culture and society, the Garinagu of Caribbean Nicaragua have initiated an intensive process of cultural and historical rescue and revitalization. [14] In the 1990s, for example, the Afro-Garifuna Association of Nicaragua (AAGANIC) began working in collaboration with Garinagu in Honduras, Belize, and Guatemala on language revitalization programs to rescue the Garifuna language, which had been all but lost in Nicaragua. More broadly, AAGANIC works toward the social, cultural, economic, and environmental development of the Garinagu people. Other Garinagu groups, like the dance group Garifuna Power and the music and dance group Spirit Dancers (now Grupo Garifuna Ruguma), work strictly on the promotion of Garinagu history and culture. Donning dashikis, colorful patterned fabrics, and 'traditional' style cotton dresses and pants in the Garinagu flag colors black, white, and yellow, they perform traditional Garinagu punta music and dance on regional, national, and international stages (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Grupo Garifuna Ruguma. Photo Courtesy of Grupo Garifuna Ruguma on Facebook.

Perhaps the largest and most representative example of Garinagu Black Indigenous and ethnic performance in Nicaragua, to which groups like Grupo Ruguma have been central, is Garifuna Settlement Day. As in Belize and the rest of Caribbean Central America, Garifuna Settlement Day in Nicaragua is intended to protect and commemorate their distinct cultural heritage. The annual holiday, which takes place November 19 in Nicaragua, serves as a platform not simply for cultural display but for the performance and deepening of the group's ties to their ancestral traditions, memories, and embodied knowledge. In this regard, the most significant activity of Garifuna Settlement Day is called "the reenactment," a performance of the Garinagu historical sojourn through the Caribbean and their arrival in Central America: "Loading themselves into dories and playing drums, singing traditional songs, waving fronds of cassava and other tropical plants, brandishing the Garifuna flag and other symbolic artifacts such as the ruguma, [15] community members restage in sociodramatic form what is often recognized as the quintessential historical experience of the Garifuna." (Gallaughier 105).

Notably, part of the Garifuna Settlement Day performance entails planting cassava and

other traditional plants into the soil to symbolize Garinagu material and cultural transplantation (Gallaughier 106). These performances are Indigenizing processes that work to mark the Garinagu as displaced Black Indigenous people that have formed new communal relationships with the lands and environmental resources of Caribbean Central America. Thus, not only do the Garinagu descend from Indigenous Africans and Indigenous Kalinago and Arawak peoples, but they have also formed autochthonous relationships with the lands they were exiled to before the foundation of Central American nation states, and, in the case of Nicaragua, before the annexation of the Mosquito Coast. These powerful declarations and performances of ethnic difference and a distinct Black Indigenous identity should not be mistaken for mere acquiescence to neoliberal multiculturalism and the demand for static, bounded, and authentic identities. They are rather part of what Christopher Loperena regards as "an attempt to carve out an autonomous political, economic and cultural domain ... an autonomous space that they can call 'home' and claim sovereignty over." (*A Fragmented Paradise* 24) Taking advantage of the political space that the Nicaraguan multicultural turn opened up for the articulation of distinct ethnic identities, Garinagu in Nicaragua have mobilized performance and cultural traditions to not only strengthen their identity and survival as a people, but to also stake claim to a regional Black Indigeneity in the face of ongoing dispossession. Studying Garinagu social and political struggles via the performance of racial and ethnic identity provides important insight into how Black diasporic peoples negotiate limited, exclusionary, and anti-Black understandings of Indigeneity; however, it is critically important to recognize that these strategies are not exclusive to the Garinagu. Instead, they point to broader manifestations of Black diasporic agency that reframe Indigeneity as a relationship to and process of sociopolitical struggle against white supremacist settler colonialism and dispossession. The case of the other officially recognized Afro-descendant group in Nicaragua, the Afro-Caribbean Creoles, presents yet another fitting example.

As is the case with the Garinagu, Creoles

on the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua are the descendants of free and enslaved Afro-descendants who formed maroon communities in the region during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Hooker, "Negotiating Blackness" 265). As Edmund T. Gordon and Juliet Hooker have outlined, Creole identity has been anything but static. Instead, their understandings and self-representations of their identities have changed over time according to the historical moment and their social and political needs (Gordon, *Disparate Diasporas* 30; Hooker, "Negotiating Blackness" 272). In recent years, and in large part as a result of racial discrimination and the marked success and visibility of Indigenous rights movements over those of Afro-descendants, Creoles have adopted a predominantly Black racial group identity (Hooker, "Negotiating Blackness" 273-274). At the same time, however, Creoles have had to appeal to an "Indigenous-like" identity in order to take advantage of the multicultural openings of the late twentieth century, which continue to privilege ethnic distinctiveness in the granting of collective rights. In addition to public discourse emphasizing Black communal relationships with land, some of the ways Creoles have asserted their right to territorial autonomy include making documented claims to the historical and communal use of ancestral lands via written accounts and oral histories. [16]

However, for the purposes of this essay, we want to suggest that Creole performances of "Indigenous-like" identities and relationships to land, tradition, and ancestral memory have perhaps unfairly been read as mere strategies for rights attainment. Instead, we propose an interpretation of Creole Indigenous performance that recognizes the dynamic nature of Creole identity formation and the possibility that, like the Garinagu, Creoles may be staking claim to a kind of regional Black Indigeneity in the face of ongoing violence and forced cultural assimilation. Creoles, too, have their own distinct cultural traditions, histories of Indigenous dispossession, and close relationships with the lands that their ancestors inhabited before the establishment of state sovereignty in the region. Given ongoing state-sanctioned violence against Black and non-Black Indigenous people in Caribbean Nicaragua, including the occupation of their

lands by Mestizx settlers and the attendant forms of racial and gendered violence that accompany this form of dispossession (Herlihy), it is entirely plausible that Creole identity has once again shifted to make space for the possibility of Creole Indigeneity. Two locations where emergent understandings of Creole Indigeneity have been most evident include public celebrations such as Emancipation Day in Corn Island, Nicaragua, and national tourism advertisements promoting the cultures of the Caribbean Coast.

The Emancipation Day Celebration, also known as the Crab Soup Festival, is a public holiday and commemoration of emancipation from slavery that takes place every August in the Corn Islands off the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua. At the end of the month from August 27 to August 29, a number of activities such as street parades, cultural performances, a Miss Corn Island beauty pageant, and sporting events are held on Big Corn Island. Audiences enjoy the festivities while eating traditional blue crab soup, the dish of choice for the emancipated Big Corn islanders who celebrated their freedom on August 27, 1841. On August 29, the festivities move to Little Corn Island to celebrate the day the enslaved there were delivered the news of their emancipation. Although Emancipation Day has become a state-promoted tourism spectacle attracting national and international visitors, the performances that take place during the celebration appear to present opportunities for the expression of an Indigenous Creole identity.

For example, as part of the pageant events, Miss Corn Island candidates perform historical recreations of island life before, during, and after emancipation. In the photo montage below (Figure 4), Miss Brig Bay reenacts a scene of everyday Creole familial life in the post-emancipation period.



Figure 4. "Historical Recreation, Miss Brig Bay #1," Photo Courtesy of Comité Municipal de Cultura, Corn Island Facebook Page.

Corn Island's Municipal Culture Committee's Facebook caption and description of her performance reads, "A representation of a family that lives in the neighborhood of Brig Bay during the nineteenth century. In her outside kitchen, she prepared her Crab Soup as they commemorate one more year of freedom from slavery." While at times these performances can tend to lighten the severity of enslavement and reproduce the violence of plantation life, they also provide an opening for contemporary Creoles to foreground their longtime historical ties to

the island, their social memories of struggle, and their relationships to the islands' lands which have sustained their distinct culture and ethnic identity. The historical performances that accompany Emancipation Day festivities thus function as a kind of declaration of Indigenous, place-based Creole identity. The fact that many Creoles can trace their nineteenth century and earlier ancestry directly to Jamaica and other Caribbean islands rather than to the Mosquito Coast only further clarifies how performance reflects the dialectical relationship between rights and identities and advances Creole socio-political struggle.

Another form of performance through which an emergent sense of a Creole Indigeneity becomes visible is Creole participation in national Nicaraguan tourism campaigns. These state-sponsored performances certainly form part of the operations of neoliberal multiculturalism in that the Nicaraguan state is able to profit off of Creole and Caribbean Coast cultural difference while providing the illusion of inclusion. However, Creoles are not necessarily unwilling subjects but active participants in multicultural state processes with the capacity to navigate and negotiate this contradictory terrain. Figure 5 is a screenshot of a 2017 Nicaraguan Institute of Tourism video featuring a presumably Creole group of high school students dancing in a traditional Maypole style to the song "Come Down Brother Willy" by the Caribbean coastal band Dimensión Costeña.



Figure 5. "Come Down Brother Willy - Dimensión Costeña," Instituto Nicaragüense de Turismo. Visit Nicaragua Youtube Video.

The video is striking for a number of reasons, not least of which is the decision to feature a song with violently patriarchal lyrics about a man murdering his wife against a backdrop of jubilant high school students. Beyond the choice of music, however, it is significant that the video features a group of mostly (if not entirely) Creoles, who are typically not considered to be Indigenous, in “traditional” folkloric-style clothing and placed strategically in multiple outdoor Caribbean coastal landscapes. Both visually and sonically, the video reads and functions as a kind of performance of Indigenous Creole identity that is intimately connected to the land and the Caribbean coastal environment. While not without its limits, such a representation is noteworthy for the space it allows Creoles to invoke their cultural difference and connection to the lands that they have historically inhabited. Beyond the rights claim, the performance of Creole Indigeneity is part of a larger social, political, and affective paradigm through which Creoles reclaim their racial, ethnic, and regional sovereignty. What these performances appear to indicate is not so much that politically legitimated Blackness must perform Indigeneity for the neoliberal multicultural state and moment, but more so that there is a shift in Creoles’ sense of self as a regional Black Indigenous group.

Conclusion

In this essay we have illustrated the variety of ways that Blackness and Indigeneity have intertwined in Belize and Nicaragua’s Caribbean Coast. The question remains, however; what does Indigenous identity offer communities in their quest for social, cultural, and political autonomy? We expect that by focusing on performance and diasporic identity formation we can provide alternative ways of thinking through overlapping iterations of belonging and rootedness in Central America. There is no direct legal claim to land by Creole communities, even though their hegemonic presence can also be seen through a complicated lens. These claims are commonly made through the cultural and socio-political realm, which we have argued is one of the key bases of Black Indigenous

subjectivity throughout Caribbean Central America. Garinagu and Creoles are intimately affiliated in Central America, demonstrating a diasporic framing of both disjuncture and partnership notwithstanding racial injustice and ongoing violence committed by the state.

In public discourse, Blackness and Indigeneity are often described and celebrated in disparate terms, but we show through our analysis of Creole and Garinagu intimacies that they often share the same geographies and lived experiences on the ground. It is exemplified by Tiffany Lethabo King’s description of “living under conquest,” which, despite the difference in interactions amongst the two groups and with the state, highlights the impossibility for not only the Garinagu, but also the Creoles to be legible as Indigenous subjects despite generalized assumptions as modern subjects (King xiii). Like other Black diasporic groups, identity politics as operating in the Creole community highlights an identity that is not fixed and stable and is historically and geographically constructed. Rather than relying solely on ancestral roots and blood quantum as an analytic of Black Indigeneity, we can emphasize the ways in which these groups come to these modes of contextualized and constructed identification by considering the politics of articulation as well as complex understandings of diaspora across the circum-Caribbean.

The question of whether these groups are legitimately Indigenous is not the only concern we address; when we situate race and place at the center of these disparate collections of knowledge and histories, we must ask *why*, *when*, and *where* these identities persist (Wright). As a critical unit of analysis and as a literal and figurative nexus of Blackness, Indigeneity, and migration in the Americas, Central America and Black Caribbean Central America in particular force us to contend with multitudinous, fluid, and constantly evolving notions of Black Indigeneity. These understandings are crucial given that it is only “as we deepen our historical and contemporary understandings of Black and Indigenous peoples throughout the Americas [that] we can begin to dismember the colonial logics of racial compartmentalization and excavate multiple Black Indigenous histories,

cultures, and politics" (López Oro, "Black Caribs/Garifuna" 137).

Endnotes

[1] Kyle T. Mays makes an important distinction between "Afro-Indigenous" and "Black Indigenous" where the former refers mostly to Black and Indigenous ancestry and the latter is about a conscious process of identity construction (Mays 44).

[2] Paul Joseph López Oro has importantly highlighted that "Blackness and Indigeneity remain codified and ascribed as mutually exclusive racial categories and identities in the Americas" ("Black Caribs/Garifuna" 137).

[3] Honduras has been the key site of studies on the Garinagu, and while the Afro-Indigeneity of groups like the Miskitu is sometimes recognized in the case of Nicaragua, it is often a tangential aspect of the scholarship or mentioned in passing.

[4] See Sarah England; Paul Joseph López Oro ("Garifunizando Ambas Américas").

[5] See Edmund T. Gordon and Mark Anderson; Peter Wade; Juliet Hooker, "Negotiating Blackness"; Sharika D. Crawford; Courtney Desiree Morris. According to Juliet Hooker, there are at least four types of Afro-Latin American groups: 1) Afro-Mestizxs, or the descendants of enslaved Africans who eventually integrated into dominant mestizx cultures and national identities; 2) descendants of enslaved Africans who developed a separate racial/cultural group identity such as the Black Brazilian Movement; 3) descendants of maroon communities such as the Quilombos in Brazil, Creoles in Nicaragua, and Garinagu in Honduras, Nicaragua, Guatemala, and Belize; and 4) descendants of West Indian immigrants who arrived as laborers in the enclave economies of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries along the Caribbean Coast of Central America ("Afro-descendant Struggles" 285).

[6] See Juliet Hooker ("Indigenous Inclusion"; "Afro-descendant Struggles"); Helen Saffa; Mark Anderson (Black and Indigenous); and Peter Wade.

[7] It is important to note that in countries like Nicaragua, Belize, and Honduras, the Creole population includes descendants of West Indian enslaved and labor migrants due to West Indian assimilation into the population of British enslaved African descendants in the Caribbean coastal region of the isthmus. In Panama, Costa Rica, and Guatemala, Caribbean coastal Black communities are primarily of West Indian descent, though the labor and political-exile migrations of Creoles and Miskitu from other Central American countries have solidified a broader Black presence.

[8] Due to the depression that followed the decline of US enclaves in the Central American Caribbean region, where Garinagu had earned respect as hard-working and reliable laborers, Garinagu were also forced to linguistically and culturally assimilate into dominant Creole culture. (See Jane Freeland 192).

[9] 'Neoliberal multiculturalism' refers to the ways in which multicultural regimes and neoliberal economic policies converge to profit off of the recognition of racial and cultural difference and ultimately limit the liberatory potential of multicultural regimes. (See Charles R. Hale).

[10] See Myrna Manzanares' interview on Channel Five Belize, *Cultural Relations in Belize, The Creole Garinagu Conflict*. In his article "How did the Garifuna Become an Indigenous People," Joseph Palacio briefly discusses how the Garinagu in Belize did not feel completely represented in the Black Nationalist Movement in the 1960s and marks this as an emergence of Afro-Indigenous articulation in the country (Palacio 22).

[11] See the work of O. Nigel Bolland; Melissa Johnson; and Anne Macpherson. Evidence shows that Creoles who were descended from free 'coloreds' and white monied British settlers attained more capital due to their proximity to whiteness and ancestry.

[12] See the introduction to Anne Macpherson's *From Colony to Nation*, and Joel Wainwright (324).

[13] In Belize 'Creole' refers to the people, 'Kriol' refers to the language and the 'c' is replaced with a 'k'.

[14] The Garinagu first traveled to Caribbean Nicaragua from Honduras for wage work in the mid-nineteenth century; however, it was not until the 1880s that they formed permanent settlements on the Mosquito Coast. They settled in the Pearl Lagoon basin in the southern Caribbean Coast and formed communities such as San Vicente, Lauba, La Fe, Justo Point, Mabugu, and Orinoco. (See Davidson 34; 38).

[15] A ruguma is a traditional woven basket used by the Garinagu to grate and strain cassava.

[16] See, for example, Gordon or Downs Sealey.

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