

## **Nicaraguan Creoles: Red, White, and Black?**

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Over the course of the last few years I have rehearsed a cautionary tale in print and by mouth to all who would listen about me as a young Black, politically active, male intellectual who spent almost ten years living on the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua in a small port town called Bluefields. There I lived with “Creoles” an African-Caribbean people of approximately 20,000 who inhabit that market town and a series of smaller villages scattered along Nicaragua’s southern Caribbean Coast. As the story goes, I had specific expectations coming to Nicaragua from the U.S. of the early 1980’s. Specifically, I carried with me a globalized notion of Blackness - the African Diaspora as community and identity. On the basis of phenotype I assumed commonalities of racial experience and cultural practice and consequently the global unity of all peoples of “African Descent” on the one hand, and absolute Black differentiation from whites and “near” whites (Mestizos) on the other. Thus armed I arrived on Nicaragua’s Caribbean Coast expecting to find in its black “Creole” community a centered African Diasporic identity and race based politics.

Of course what I found was very much more complex. Most shocking for me at the time, some Creoles insisted that their origins as a people were to be found in England and that they were just as white as they were black and had an Anglo culture. I read the preeminent Creole historian Donovan Brautigham Beer who in the late 1970’s stated flat out that:

*The majority of the “English” Costeños [Creoles] have some English blood. Their parents, who in many cases were English, transmitted to them English culture with some modifications determined by the time and the distance.*

The elderly head of the family with whom I stayed for many years told me in the early 1990's that:

*You had king, you know. The king was Miskito. Miskito people. Originally, I say, from England. England had a lot to do with it. [ETG: Who was from England?] Both the Indians and the Creoles. Both of them. [ETG: Were originally from England?] That's right. [ETG: So the Miskitu and the Creoles came from England to here?] That's right. [ETG: So then they came from England to what, to Jamaica and Cayman and then from there to here?] Exactly, because all - most of those poor people that died [previous generations of Creoles]. They still believed that here supposed to be for England. They still have that belief up until when they died.*

A close friend of mine from Corn Island claimed to have been taught as a youth:

*The teaching on that was ... telling us that we descend from people from Caymans and from Providence. And you, you know, try to follow that up and, and they would carry you right back to Scotland, you know. They would trace you right back to Scotland and Englishman. That is what I knew about my [ancestors]. ... We thought. At least I thought the Englishman was like me because that is what they taught me, that I was descended from Englishmen.*

A teacher from the local High School expert in traditional Creole dance told me:

*We call ourselves Creole and people say if you are Black you come from Africa. But we are, Creoles, a very mixed group. Many of us that you see here, our ancestors is -*

*We don't find them in Africa. We find them in different parts where Africans were. For instance, many of our people on the North [Puerto Cabazas] are Jamaicans or from Limon. Many of our black - We don't have any pure Black people here in Bluefields.*

On the other hand, many Creoles also have a Black diasporic identity. There were Creoles who identified as Black and saw a relation between themselves and others in the Black Diaspora. Some even claimed African origins for the group. In the early 1990's a fairly well educated and middle aged civil servant from Bluefields told me:

*Its two version that they [the old people] had how we Creole people reach here. One is that we came as slaves when a ship was - You know they come when they used to sell the slaves. And they had, like, a ship wreck or something like that and the slaves came into the north part of the Atlantic Coast and they mixed up with - amongst the Indians and that's how Creoles got here. And they have another version that is not exactly [the same] - that they had a auction, see like, then brought the Black people as slaves to work here in the Atlantic Coast. And they gave the specific case of Corn Island where they had native people here working as slaves then. And that's how they come in.*

A couple of years ago I received emails from a Creole acquaintance living in Managua. He has opened up correspondence with a number of Creoles living in the Atlantic Coast, Managua, and the US focusing on racial politics. In these unfolding online conversations the clear emphasis is on the forging of an Afro-latino identity for Creoles to address racial injustice, a connection back to Africa, and identification with other Blacks in the Diaspora.

*Your comment about the Afro-Latinos getting lost in their nationalities, I believe is understandable ... In this context, those of African origins, victims of ignorance, to some degree feel that they are not at the bottom of society. Notwithstanding, ... there are conscious individuals from Latin-American countries and from all spheres of life that do recognize their origins. As to the Originators of mankind, there's no doubt in the recognized fact that Africa has been the crib of human development. However, over the past 500 years, the European has taken advantage by following the laws of economics and exploit all those non-white peoples that rely on spirituality alone. ... For this uncontestable fact only is why those of African Origin should make an effort to control their economies, if they hope to get out of the morass, squalor and ignorance in which they live.*

Just last month a group of Creole activists clearly identifying as Black invited me to attend a round table discussion which capped off a month of activities in celebration of Bluefield's 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. The email sent me started off as follows:

*As you may be informed, Bluefields 100 years anniversary of been promoted to city status is upcoming. Bluefields city hall, sponsored by the IDB have planned several activities to carry out during the months of August, September and October. The black community in Bluefields feel that these activities does not take into account our history, but got stagnated in contemporary Bluefields, it also does not show us as people that can think and be creative at an academic level, but has decide to sell the idea of coast people that love only to have a good time dancing and playing sports. Seeing these things, this said community offered their aid to the organizers of*

*the event, but got rejected, so we decided to go ahead on our own and organize our commemoration of this anniversary.*

The activities organized by this self proclaimed Black group included a “Little Miss Black” contest, and such symposia as “Black Spirituality and Traditional Medicine,” and “Black women’s Role in Our History,”

Simultaneously, there is a third trajectory of Creole identity, Creoles as Indian peoples. During visits to the village of Pearl Lagoon about five years ago I was surprised to find friends who during the 1980’s had told me they were black and Creole now claiming to be Miskitu Indian. One told me that he claimed to be Creole only because he looked Black but that his ancestors were all Miskitu. Another who looks strikingly like Putney Swope claimed that the entire community was descended from Miskitu Indians. Yet another claimed that the people of the village were “Indian by blood and Creole by custom.” During the 1998 election campaign for positions in the local Autonomous government Creole friends of mine, one of whom thought of himself as Rasta and all of whom I consider to be Afro-centric, formed a political party; the Seven Tender Leaves Indigenous Movement. In their “Statutes” they claim that Creoles “... and the Indigenous people are from one social formation,” that Creoles “...are a miscegenation of American Indians, Africans Indians, and Europeans, “ and that “the people of Bluefields [Creoles] ... by rights granted to the indigenous people” have rights to communal lands, i.e. Creoles are Indian people.

### **Creoles Interpolated Constructivists?**

Early on during my stay in Bluefields, realizing, I guess, that there was no unitary, stable racial/cultural core at the center of Creole identity and from which the group’s politics were invariably waged, I turned to Creole history as a way to understand how this could be.

I found a rich complex and varied history and social memory. Within it were clear indications of discursive formations produced within specific modalities of power (specifically Spanish and British colonialism, U.S. imperialism and Nicaraguan internal colonialism), in which Creoles were fixed as inferior others. Briefly, in the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries as the British and Spanish battled for colonial domination of the Mosquitia, competing discourses concerning Creoles emerged. On the one hand, Creoles were constructed as part of the “Sambo” Miskitu a vicious “mongrel” mix of African/Indian interlopers who protected British interests in the Mosquitia and threatened those of the Spanish. On the other hand, they were understood to be a subset of the Miskitu Indians who as legitimate and original residents of the Mosquitia legitimized British colonial control of the area. With the emergence of U.S. military and economic dominance over the Miskitu Coast in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century racist discourses and practices that constructed the Creoles as inferior Blacks of African descent, a servile class for U.S. entrepreneurs, emerged. Simultaneously, as the emergent Nicaraguan State established and then strengthened its sovereignty over the Atlantic Coast, Creoles were constructed and treated as racially black and inferior as well as Anglo cultured and therefore radically non-national or foreign. These power laden discourses and practices constructing Creoles alternately and simultaneously as Black, Indian, and Anglo have swirled through their history as a people. And as I have previously shown Creoles enact these identities.

Emerging from the very modern Nicaraguan space of revolution, counterrevolution, warfare, poverty, utopian dreams, extraordinary heroics, generosity, and mutuality and into the post-modern world of US academia I have come to understand that Creoles are the poster child for constructivist understandings of identification processes.

If, as Stuart Hall (1996:1) claims, modernist notions of identity have been deconstructed through compelling attacks upon "... the notion of an integral, originary and unified identity.... [and] the self sustaining subject" then Creoles stand as a good example of what identity in the modern sense is not. As my very brief history indicates, Creole identities seem to be constructed through interpolation, through discursive and disciplinary regulation in which regulatory power produces the subjects it controls and ... individuals are summoned into place in discursive structures" (Hall 1996:13). Creole identities seem not to be unified, but are "... multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions" and, in short, contingent (Hall 1996:4).

### **Creoles Self-making Essentialists**

However, on closer examination I believe that the Creole case, while providing compelling bases for a constructivist approach to identification, also calls aspects of this approach into question. First, there is clearly a difference between the ways in which Creoles are interpolated and their performance of those interpolated identities. For example, when in 1979 Nicaraguan president Daniel Ortega refers to Creoles as "*negros*" and then states that "black power and other manifestations... were far from their reality" (Anonymous 1979:4) his folkloric and class essentialist notion of black identity was a far cry from Miss Jenelee Hodgson's (leader of mass demonstrations against the revolution in 1980) shout of "Black is beautiful" or Rollin Toby's 1999 statements about Africa as "the crib of human development." The idea of Creoles as Afro-Latino, while not a complete departure from interpolated blackness, is nevertheless a new identity constructed by Creoles in the interstices of previous identities. The Black Group whose celebration I recently participated in, rejects the state's representation of Creole history and character replacing

them with ideas about their history and culture generated by the Creole community itself. In fact, a careful look at Creole identification processes and politics indicate that Creoles have not only performed their interpolated positions in myriad ways but have resisted them, negotiated them, accommodated to them, used them as tools in their own struggles, and only rarely performed them as interpolated (Hall 1996).

Each one of the identity processes with which I began this talk represents a tactical negotiation and an agentive construction of identity within a specific conjuncture. The Anglo identities became salient during a time when anti-Sandinista tendencies in the community made identification with powerful Anglos like the US seem common sense. The indigenous identities when rights to land based on originary claims were being struggled over on the Coast. The Black identities when Blackness and modernity has become a powerful discourse and when the rights of Afro-Latinos are being discussed at the White House.

It seems to me that this is to be expected for dominance constructs identities through the invocation of difference. (Hall 1996:5) This play of power and exclusion interpolates the other as a series of negations and absences. These negations and absences are filled as the subaltern other invests in the identity. In this way the subjectivity is constituted and subjects participate in making themselves based on the particular repertoire of material and symbolic resources available to them as the interpolated. Identification processes can also be self-making as an effect of the multiplicity of often competing, interpolating discursive formations (e.g. in the Creoles case Anglo, Black, Indigenous). The resulting lack of unity and indeterminacy allows those discourses to be played off one another, to be combined, mixed and matched, by those interpolated and exacerbates the slippage between sign and



signifier that creates the possibility to slide outside of these discursive structures. Hence, Creoles as Latino Blacks, African Indians, etc. As Hall (1996) states and as is demonstrated in the Creole case, identification is an articulation of interpolation and subjective self-constitution.

Second, while the notion that identity is multiple, uncentered, and invented seems to be born out, the Creole case indicates that it is not endlessly contingent as argued by radical constructivists. One indication of this is the relative stability of Creole multiple identities over time. Historically, Creoles did not wage identity politics from a single subjectivity but instead from the mix of cross cutting subject positions that roughly correspond to the contemporary ones I have already discussed. Creoles tactically dressed their group identity in more encompassing subject positions. This often lent the group greater legitimacy and/or became a means of creating alliances with other powerful interests. At times, Creoles cast themselves as modern and civilized constructing a diasporic "Anglo" identity for themselves. This recurring subject position was especially invoked in the wake of the 1894 Nicaraguan annexation of the Mosquitia when it seemed that British or possibly U.S. assistance on their behalf might be mobilized. Creoles also played on their indigenous identifications, especially in the 1920's, with the advent of the various indigenous Leagues. Here the appeal was to their autochthonous rights as an original people of the Coast. They simultaneously strongly identified as Black, subscribing to a Black Caribbean diasporic identity that through the work of the UNIA gained considerable international notoriety and influence during the 1910's and 20's. The residues of these subject positions, issues, practices, and discourses are important components of contemporary Creole political common sense. These historic identities are not precisely the same as those displayed

contemporarily. However, they are clearly related. They are part of what Hall (1996:2) calls the “determinate conditions of existence” of contemporary Creole identity. They are components of the symbolic and material resources from which identity is constructed, not from thin air but from the complex interplay of the groups’ particular history and social memory which help constitute the group’s common sense.

The Creole case indicates that identity is conditional and contingent but not endlessly so. Even though it is multiple, it is lived as stable and unified by modernist subjects invested in politics of location. More importantly, the contents of history and memory are relatively finite and fixed at any given moment in time. Therefore identity is limited at any given moment by specific histories of power-laden interpolations and by the specificity and particularity of the symbolic and material resources available for subject making. These latter are the products of particular history and social memory processes that again are finite and fixed in that moment. Put more simply, right now Creoles cannot be Bosnian Muslims or Nicaraguan Mestizos. The specifics of Creole history and memory do not provide the necessary resources for such acts of identification. However, they probably can be Afro-Anglo, Afro-Latino, and Miskitu Indian and a range of other identities.

Why is this important?

If the object is to change the world -that is still mine no matter how old, battered and ineffectual- it is important to know that we are and can be through our own efforts more than and different than what we are interpolated to be. But then those of us who are Black or Queer or women, throwing off the nihilism of Foucauldian disciplinary technologies, already know that we are more and less than the white boys think anyway.

More importantly, for the most part struggles outside of academia against injustice and oppression, like those of the Creoles, are waged around politics of location. The notion of “momentary” essentialism I am developing here helps us to understand such politics as something more than “false consciousness” and wrong headed authoritarian essentialism. This conceptualization allows us to better understand the inevitability as well as flexibility - within limits- of momentary locations from which to strategically struggle. It opens up the possibility of conjunctural and tactical coalition building while providing bases for avoiding knee-jerk alienation and rejection. Simultaneously, it reminds of the possibility and imperative of change overtime, of constructing the symbolic and material resources necessary for the expansion of articulation and equivalence between radically democratic struggles.

Anonymous

1979            Efectiva incorporación de la Costa Atlántica. Barricada October 6:6

Hall, Stuart

1996            Introduction: Who Needs Identity? In Questions of Cultural Identity. Eds.  
Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay. London: Sage