Unsettling the "non-indigenous:" *Mestizo* identity constructions and territorial conflicts

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Abstract

This article complicates the dominant narratives of territorial conflicts between indigenous communities and *mestizo campesinos* in Nicaragua's Bosawas Biosphere Reserve. I suggest that the framing of these conflicts as "interethnic" obscures how class and space shape the multiple, intersectional identities and experiences of *mestizo campesinos* and justifies their exclusion. Furthermore, the interethnic narrative hampers the distinction between "*mestizo*" *campesinos* and "*mestizo*" elites who facilitate the colonization of indigenous territories through policies prioritizing extractivism and large-scale agriculture that compromise indigenous territorial security and rural lives. In this way, dominant narratives enable violence against both *mestizo campesinos* and indigenous communities. The article contributes to political-ecological debates on the construction and materiality of seemingly unmarked *mestizo* identities, which have often remained unexplored in the literature.

Keywords: territorial conflicts; intersectionality; *mestizo* identity

Resumen

Este artículo critica las narrativas dominantes sobre los conflictos territoriales entre comunidades indígenas y campesinos mestizos en la Reserva de la Biosfera Bosawas de Nicaragua. Sostengo que el encuadre de estos conflictos como "interétnicos" oscurece cómo la clase y el espacio moldean las identidades y experiencias múltiples e interseccionales de los campesinos mestizos y justifica su exclusión. Además, la narrativa interétnica dificulta la distinción entre campesinos "mestizos" y élites "mestizas" que facilitan la colonización de territorios indígenas mediante políticas que priorizan el extractivismo y la agricultura a gran escala, perjudicando la seguridad territorial indígena y las vidas rurales. De esta manera, las narrativas dominantes permiten la violencia tanto contra campesinos mestizos como contra comunidades indígenas. El artículo contribuye a los debates político-ecológicos sobre la construcción y la materialidad de identidades mestizas supuestamente no marcadas, que a menudo han quedado sin explorar en la literatura.

Palabras clave: conflictos territoriales; interseccionalidad; identidad mestiza

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Resumo

Este artigo complexifica as narrativas dominantes sobre os conflitos territoriais entre comunidades indígenas e camponeses mestiços na Reserva da Biosfera de Bosawas, na Nicarágua. Sugiro que o enquadramento desses conflitos como "interétnicos" obscurece como classe e espaço moldam as múltiplas identidades e experiências interseccionais dos camponeses mestiços e justifica sua exclusão. Além disso, a narrativa interétnica dificulta a distinção entre camponeses "mestiços" e elites "mestiças" que facilitam a colonização de territórios indígenas por meio de políticas que priorizam o extrativismo e a agricultura em larga escala, comprometendo a segurança territorial indígena e a vida rural. Dessa forma, as narrativas dominantes possibilitam a violência tanto contra camponeses mestiços quanto contra comunidades indígenas. O artigo contribui para os debates político-ecológicos sobre a construção e a materialidade de identidades mestiças aparentemente não marcadas, que muitas vezes permaneceram inexploradas na literatura.

Palavras-chave: conflitos territoriais; interseccionalidade; identidade mestiça

1. Introduction

"We don't work with *mestizos*", an officer of the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources (MARENA) declared when the organization I represented started a development project in Nicaragua's Bosawas Biosphere Reserve in 2012. With "*mestizos*," he referred to "non-indigenous" people in the indigenous territories of Bosawas, located in the country's Northern Caribbean Coast Autonomous Region (RACCN). Dominant news accounts and government discourses describe them as migrants from the country's Pacific Coast, violently colonizing indigenous and Afro-descendant lands (e.g., Confidencial, 2021; Ernst, 2021). In the project area, it became evident that these "settlers" often did not match the imaginaries of "*mestizo colonos* [colonists]" – powerful cattle ranchers and land traffickers with ties to Nicaragua's Sandinista government. Instead, many self-identified as *campesinos* who had often been displaced elsewhere by "*mestizo*" actors and political-economic processes. Thus, what was meant by "not working with *mestizos*?" Who fell into this category, the largest ethnic group in Nicaragua and many other countries in Latin America, that generally would cover not only *campesinos* but also high- and middle-class urban "*mestizos*" (including the MARENA official himself)?

These questions are increasingly salient as violent conflicts in indigenous territories intensify in Nicaragua and elsewhere. Dominant accounts generally present them as local, interethnic disputes between two incompatible groups – indigenous and *mestizo* (see Le Billon & Duffy, 2018). In this article, I push forward political ecological literature of intersectional identities by bringing it into conversation with critical race studies of *mestizaje*, multiculturalism, and Latin American whiteness to suggest that the interethnic framing of territorial struggles conceals their complex drivers, state and elite interests, and how marginalization operates through multiple, intersecting axes of race, class, and space. I focus particularly on *mestizo* identities, often essentialized and racialized simply as "non-indigenous." The narratives that lump *mestizo* actors ignore crucial differences in power and lived experiences, erasing how the "*mestizo*" state and elites drive both the invasion of indigenous territories and the marginalization of *mestizo campesinos* by, for instance, prioritizing extractivism and industrial agriculture. The narrative is thus insensitive to Latin America's high inequality in terms of income, land ownership, and access to public goods (Burchardt & Dietz, 2014). It conceals the structural drivers of territorial conflicts and large-scale environmental change by conflating capitalist resource extraction with a uniform "*mestizo*" identity, which has material consequences for how land is governed and how rights are distributed.

By contrasting the discursive constructions of an unmarked, homogeneous "*mestizo*" identity to the experiences of my research participants in Bosawas, I suggest that the *mestizo* category obscures the messy contingencies and materialities of *campesino* lives, erasing the lived realities of the peasantry. I particularly examine how race, class, and space function both as mechanisms that facilitate settlement and as discursive components that produce the "*mestizo-colono*" identity of *campesinos*. Due to the racial-spatial framing of Nicaragua's Caribbean Coast as an "unproductive" indigenous and Afro-descendant space, it has traditionally hosted *campesinos* displaced from the "*mestizo*" Pacific Coast and acted as a target for extractivist and agroindustrial activities, facilitating the colonization of indigenous territories (Finley-Brook & Offen, 2009; Hooker, 2010; Vilas, 1989). Yet, while *mestizo-campesinos* hold racial privilege over indigenous communities, they also experience class-based marginalization vis-à-vis *mestizo* elites. Their racially privileged "*mestizo*" status, combined with marginalized class and spatial positions, often renders them out-of-place on the Caribbean Coast and justifies their exclusion – "not working with *mestizos*" or eviction from indigenous territories through Nicaragua's *saneamiento territorial* [territorial cleansing] policy, which *mestizo* elites are relatively safe from (Sylvander, 2021). Thus, their position in Bosawas is distinctly different from that of wealthy *mestizos*. As a government representative I interviewed stated: "There are these categories, landholders, outsiders… settlers… but… there's a lack of understanding of *mestizos*, who they are, where they come from… there's a lack of class analysis" (Dennis, interview[2], 2016).

The article has theoretical implications beyond the Nicaraguan context, as *mestizo* subjectivities have rarely been centered in political ecology literature on territorial conflicts, despite their key role in these dynamics (but see Bocarejo, 2009; Fontana, 2014; Ojeda, 2016; Ojeda & González, 2018, for important accounts of non-indigenous peasant identities). Thus, it contributes to political-ecological debates on the construction and materiality of seemingly unmarked *mestizo campesino* identities, often left unpacked in literature. It underscores the importance of unsettling these identities in spaces where "indigenous" and "non-indigenous" people co-exist, even when these inquiries might feel uncomfortable. Doing so also enables a political-ecological analysis that highlights the structural drivers of territorial conflicts and environmental degradation instead of reducing them to interethnic disputes.

2. Contextualizing land conflicts in Bosawas

Nicaragua has historically been divided into a "*mestizo*" Pacific Coast and an "indigenous and Afro-descendant" Caribbean Coast. While the Pacific Coast was colonized by the Spanish, the Caribbean Coast remained under British influence and was forcibly annexed to Nicaragua in 1894, subjecting the area's indigenous territories to the looting of natural resources and the erasure of local governance structures (Baracco, 2016; Larson *et al*., 2016). In 1987, the Autonomy Statute (Law 28) established the Northern and Southern Autonomous Regions of the Caribbean Coast (RACCN and RACCS, formerly Northern and Southern Atlantic Autonomous Regions). They cover approximately 50% of the national territory and represent 12% of the population (Mairena *et al*., 2014). Due to these historical constructions, most of Nicaragua's officially recognized 23 indigenous and Afro-descendant territories belong to the Miskitu, Mayangna, Rama, Kriol, and Garifuna communities in these Autonomous Regions. They are titled under the 2003 Communal Lands Law 445, which is often cited as one of the most advanced legislative frameworks for indigenous territorial rights in Latin America. While Law 445 should guarantee communities' de facto autonomy over their territories, the

[2] I translated all interview quotes from Spanish. I use pseudonyms to protect the identity of my collaborators and research participants.

implementation of its final stage, *saneamiento territorial,* or the clarification of land titles and the removal of settlers who arrived after the 1987 Autonomy Statute, is incomplete. Thus, indigenous territorial security remains weak, and different Nicaraguan governments have used the Caribbean Coast as a resource and land bank, and as a source of foreign investment (Baracco & González, 2016; Finley-Brook, 2016; Larson *et al*., 2016).[3] Hence, its indigenous and Afro-descendant territories have been subjected to state-sanctioned territorialization efforts, resettlement projects, extractivist activities, and conservation initiatives (Gonda *et al.*, 2023; Mayer, 2021; Soto Joya, 2011; Vilas, 1989). The presence of *mestizos* in Bosawas is rooted in these complex histories.

Land ownership in indigenous and Afro-descendant territories is messy, and land sales are ubiquitous, although Law 445 renders them illegal. This is the case particularly in the seven Mayangna and Miskitu territories of Bosawas (Figure 1), which was declared a protected area in 1991 and a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve in 1997 with little consultation from indigenous communities, and where the protected area status allows the state to claim ownership over "national" resources, despite communal land titles (Kaimowitz & Faune, 2003).

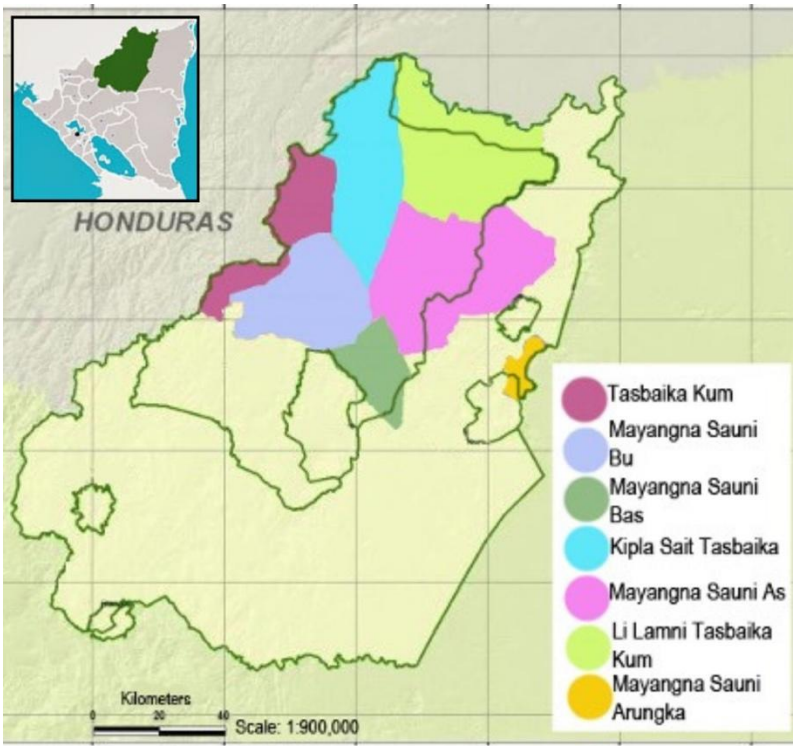

Figure 1: Indigenous territories of Bosawas. Source: Modified from *Secretaría Técnica de Bosawas*.

[3] For detailed accounts of indigenous and Afro-descendant territorial legislation in Nicaragua, see for example the special issue edited by Baracco & González (2016).

This article is based on over 12 months of ethnographic research, conducted over 10 years[4], in one of Bosawas's indigenous territories, Mayangna Sauni Bas, where *mestizos* now represent a majority, although the community has had official land titles since 2003 (personal communication, 2023). The research was designed in collaboration with the Indigenous Territorial Government (GTI). I interviewed 135 *mestizo campesinos* and leaders, Mayangna community members, government and NGO officials, and academics. Moreover, I had access to survey data collected by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), including information about landholdings and socioeconomic status of *mestizos* in Mayangna Sauni Bas in 2003 and 2010.

Both state discourses and news media are primary sites where the "interethnic" narrative that reduces *mestizo* identities to "non-indigenous" and ignores differences in power and class is constructed and disseminated. To unpack media framings of conflicts, I analyzed 112 news articles (50 in Spanish and 62 in English) published between 2013 and 2024. Twenty-nine articles appeared in Nicaraguan opposition media, including *La Prensa* and *Confidencial*, which were selected because state-aligned Nicaraguan media rarely cover territorial conflicts. The rest were published in international outlets. The articles were selected through a systematic search using keywords such as "Bosawas," "indigenous territories," "*colonos*," and "conflicts," and by manual sorting for relevant articles addressing territorial conflicts in Bosawas, focusing on those that characterized the actors involved. Thematic analysis was used to identify, analyze, and report patterns within interviews with government and development officials and news articles, including the interethnic narrative, the homogeneity of the *mestizo*, the *colono* identity, and state abandonment and precarity. Applying critical discourse analysis to these articles and interviews allowed me to further tease out discursive constructions, examining how language reproduces power and privilege, naturalizes racial hierarchies, and justifies the exclusion of the rural poor. I then contrasted these narratives with the lived experiences of my research participants, which reflected materialities of land tenure and institutional abandonment. These contrasts are important, as *mestizo* peasant voices were largely absent from the dominant discourses: for example, of the 112 news articles I analyzed, only three interviewed *campesinos*.

3. Conceptualizing *mestizo* identities

Intersectional peasant identities and marginalizing political-economic structures

Political ecologists conceptualize identities as intersectional and context-dependent (Mollett, 2021; Sengupta & Harris, 2022). This emphasis contrasts with earlier literature on environmental conflicts that often treated identity categories, such as "peasants," as fixed. As Sundberg explained in 2008 (p. 572, original emphasis), "scholars working on environmental struggles tend to view social *categories* as less important than political and environmental *processes*. Hence, social groups are assigned coherent or taken-for-granted identities like 'indigenous people' or 'such and such ethnic group' *prior to* their entry into politico-ecological relations in question." Feminist political ecologists, especially, challenge these essentialized categories and study how axes of social difference such as class, race, gender, and space shape environmental struggles and how discursive "understandings of identities and subjectivities [are] mutually constructed by environmental practices" (Perry & Gillespie, 2019, p. 75; see also Elmhirst, 2011; Mollett, 2011; Nightingale, 2011; Valdivia, 2005; Vaz-Jones, 2018). Political ecology is well-suited for this task, given its focus on power, privilege, and exclusion and its post-structuralist turn, which emphasizes the role of discourses and

[4] Since the 2018 political crisis, conducting fieldwork in Nicaragua has been complicated. Hence, instead of spending long, continuous periods of time in the country, I have done research over shorter periods.

representations in environmental conflict (Perry & Gillespie, 2019). The intersectional approach also allows for understanding how categories such as race, class, and gender are not separate dimensions but mutually constitutive colonial constructions that shape privilege (Lugones, 1994, 2008). While race was relatively absent from early political ecology research (Mollett & Faria, 2013), political ecologists now show how environmental and land struggles are crucial contexts in which racialization and racial hierarchies are produced and reproduced, with fundamentally material consequences (Loperena, 2022; Meehan *et al*., 2023; Mollett, 2021; Sultana, 2021; Sundberg, 2008; Van Sant *et al*., 2021; Ybarra, 2017). Much literature in political ecology and racial and territorial configurations in Latin America has focused on indigenous and Afro-descendent identities, showing how these identities are the primary "ethnic" subjects othered in state and NGO discourses (e.g., Hale, 2002; Hooker, 2010; Loperena, 2022; Mollett, 2002; Valdivia, 2005; Ybarra, 2011). This focus is vital, but it can also reinforce the indigenous/*mestizo* binary and the unmarkedness of the *mestizo* category. While there is limited political ecological engagement with the racialized constructions of *mestizo* identities, scholars importantly analyze how the "non-indigenous" framing of peasant identities can constrain the rights and resources they can access (Bocarejo, 2009; Ojeda & González, 2018). They show how these identities are increasingly marginalized by neoliberal and extractivist policies that have transformed rural economic and social lives in much of Latin America, limiting peasants' material and political space (Devine *et al*., 2020; Kay, 2015; Ojeda, 2016).

This marginalization is intensified by the focus on extractivism, export-led "development," and foreign investment, which remain largely unchallenged in much of Latin America, despite the anti-neoliberal rhetoric in countries such as Nicaragua (Acosta, 2013). This emphasis is distinctly racialized, as the state and companies often justify these activities through modernist discourses, contrasting their "productivity" with the indigenous, "unproductive" ways of managing land (Guerisoli & Mandirola, 2024). This framing has contributed to the ways in which "*mestizo*-ness" – or non-indigeneity – is often conflated with extractivism, solidifying racial categories. Yet, as scholars have shown, the impacts of extractivism are highly intersectional, leading to the concentration of land and displacement of smallholders (Aguilar-Støen, 2016; Bretón *et al*., 2022; Renfrew, 2011; Vergara-Camus & Kay, 2017). At the same time, these crises for peasants have often benefited *mestizo* elites (Kay, 2015; Martí i Puig & Baumeister, 2017). As Bocarejo (2009, p. 321) puts it: "…if any portion of the population is actually 'winning' anything, it would actually be the local elites whose lands remain untouched." In other words, the distribution of land, resources, and capital is fundamentally unequal under the dominant productivist models, which the discourse that focuses solely on ethnic difference ignores.

Thus, using Ceron-Anaya *et al*.'s (2023) terminology, I understand agricultural and extractivist frontiers as "proxies for racial and class distinctions" (p. 190) where "distinct material inequalities produce racialized identities in sites and among populations that have primarily remained protected by their presumed racial neutrality" (p. 192). Making these dynamics visible challenges "interethnic" narratives that lump *mestizo* peasants and more powerful *mestizos* and enables the observation of the "many shades of difference that lie within this category" (Nayak, 2007, p. 738). This emphasis, then, allows for separating *mestizo campesinos* from the political-economic processes and the *mestizo* elites, whose interests often characterize the official "unmarked" *mestizo* narrative and marginalize both indigenous communities and *mestizo* smallholders. It highlights how the interethnic narrative works as a tool that isolates indigenous and *campesino* struggles and masks the state's role as the internal colonial power (Gámez *et al.*, 2025).

In the following sections, I draw on Latin American whiteness, *mestizaje*, and multiculturalism to discuss how the "*mestizo*" category has become essentialized in ways that starkly contrast with

political-ecological understandings of identities as negotiated and relational (see Elmhirst, 2011; Nightingale, 2011).

The "unmarked" narrative of mestizaje

Baldwin (2012, p 173) defines whiteness as "a racialized subject position that is remarkable for its seeming invisibility." It extends beyond bodies to structures, and white populations benefit from neutral-appearing social arrangements (Christian, 2019; Ramos-Zayas, 2001; Webb & Radcliffe, 2015). Scholars problematize this "unmarkedness" that maintains hegemonic racial structures and privilege and against which race is positioned as a difference (Bonds & Inwood, 2016; Bonnett, 1997; Nayak, 2007). Whiteness is, instead, fluid, context-specific, and socially constructed. Political ecologists increasingly engage with whiteness (Mollett & Faria, 2013). Moreover, an emerging body of literature examines whiteness in Latin America, building on the profound scholarship on race in the region (e.g., the special issue of *Latin American and Caribbean Ethnic Studies* 18 [2]). In much of Latin America, the "unmarked," dominant racial position is *mestizo* (Moreno Figueroa, 2010).

"*Mestizo*" generally refers to a person with mixed indigenous, Iberian, and, when acknowledged instead of simply ignored, African ancestry (Gould, 2004).[5] *Mestizo* identity was not always associated with privilege, as colonial racial hierarchies positioned Europeans over indigenous and formerly enslaved people (De la Cadena, 2005). Yet, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, official narratives shifted to acknowledge the population's mixed origins, and the *mestizaje* discourse emerged in many Latin American countries.[6] While how *mestizaje* unfolded in different contexts is historically and geographically contingent, it has been defined as racial and cultural mixing on the one hand, and a unifying nation-building discourse on the other (Moreno Figueroa, 2010; Wade, 2001).

"*Mestizo*" is thus a constructed and constantly reaffirmed position, and its invisibility naturalizes racial orderings (Cárdenas, 2023). As a homogenizing nation-building and racial democracy discourse, *mestizaje* masks how "racial hierarchies are established around white-European privilege constructed relationally against indigenous and Afro-descent populations" (Webb & Radcliffe, 2015, p. 131). In other words, *mestizaje* denies the significance of race while attempting to eliminate indigeneity and blackness (Christian, 2019; Goldberg, 2009; Mollett, 2021). Indeed, the "ethnic" rather than "racial" framing of *mestizo* and indigenous populations reflects how *mestizaje* obscured the racialization of identities and reduced them to cultural differences. Moreover, the race-class constructions of *mestizaje* prioritize lighter *mestizo* bodies over darker ones, including those of many *campesinos* (Mollett & Faria, 2013). *Mestizaje* thus operates "as a complex form of whiteness, that is, as a normative privileged location of identity that is normalized and ambiguous" (Moreno Figueroa, 2010, p. 399). At the same time, this whiteness acts as a "moral condition and a universalist identity that embodies the capitalist ethos of productivity, accumulation, and individuality" (Gámez et al., 2025, p. 129).

[5] How "*mestizo*" is understood varies between Latin American countries. Moreover, for example, in Guatemala and Honduras, the term "*ladino*" is often used instead of "*mestizo*" to highlight the cultural aspects of *mestizaje* (see Goldberg, 2009). I use "*mestizo*" in this article, as nation-building narratives evoke this category in Nicaragua.

[6] *Mestizaje* was not the hegemonic discourse in all contexts – homogenizing whitening narratives were prevalent, for instance, in Argentina, Uruguay, and Costa Rica (see: Gayles & Muñoz-Muñoz, 2023; Goldberg, 2009).

Moreno Figueroa (2010, p. 398) notes that, in Mexico, "[j]ust as the category of 'white' only seems to appear in relation to 'other' racialized groups, the attribution of 'mestiza/o' also only appears in relation to Indígena and Afro-Mexican peoples and cultures…." Thus, it becomes activated in certain contexts, often in contrast to indigeneity; for example, in the context of "interethnic" territorial conflicts. This analytical "splitting" of ethnicity into discrete and manageable categories (Lugones, 1994) establishes elite "*mestizo*" perspectives as the norm, invisibilizing the lived experiences and contingent realities of marginalized *campesinos* and concealing the structural drivers of conflict.

In Nicaragua, while the discourses of different governments varied[7], official narratives have conceptualized the country as a "*mestizo* society" since the early 20th century, partly in response to British control and U.S. imperialism (Gould, 2004; Vilas, 1989). This focus renders indigeneity historical, elevating past heroic struggles but negating contemporary indigenous and Afro-descendant identities – fabricating "an indigenous past and a mestizo present" that reproduce racial hierarchies and elevate whiteness (Hooker, 2005a, p. 28; Wolfe, 2010).

Mestizaje ignored internal differentiations, including the multitude of indigenous and Afro-descendant communities. It also reinforced the historical separation of the Pacific and Caribbean Coasts, locating indigenous and Afro-descendant identities on the Caribbean Coast and erasing them from the Pacific Coast (Cunningham Kain, 2008; Gould, 1998; Vilas, 1989). Hooker (2010) has shown that this spatial racialization was crucial to the Nicaraguan nation-building project, as it justified internal colonialism and the othering and exploitation of the Caribbean Coast and its inhabitants and resources by the "civilized" Pacific Coast.

Mestizaje, then, reified the otherness of indigenous and Afro-descendant identities by establishing Nicaragua as *mestiza*, Spanish-speaking, Catholic, heterosexual, and male (Soto Joya, 2011). At the same time, it institutionalized the "mythic homogeneity" of the *mestizo* category, concealing the heterogeneity of the identities it encompasses (Gudmundson, 2010, p. 239). Thus, it also erased how whiteness, and *mestizo*-ness, can be "constrained by class and geography," and how the privilege granted by them is sometimes precarious (Ceron-Anaya *et al*., 2023; Rebollo Gil, 2023, p. 299). In other words, *mestizaje* ignores how *mestizo* interacts with other intersectional positions that shape racialized experiences, producing power disparities and unequal access to resources (Loyola-Hernández, 2018; Ramos-Zayas, 2001). Due to these intersections, being *mestizo* does not necessarily mean the same for *mestizo* campesinos and *mestizo* elites, or *mestizos* on the Pacific versus Caribbean Coasts, despite the racial privilege it grants.

Multicultural "recognition"

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, *mestizaje* seemingly gave way to the recognition of indigenous peoples' rights to their identities, cultures, and territories in much of Latin America. Research in political ecology, critical race studies, and related fields has comprehensively unpacked the impacts of this multicultural turn on indigenous and Afro-descendant populations (e.g., Anderson, 2007; Hale, 2002; Hooker, 2005b; Postero, 2006; Mollett, 2011; Velásquez Runk, 2012). It has shown how multicultural discourses often constrain indigenous and Afro-descendant identities and rights, reducing them to parameters compatible with neoliberalism and legible to and controllable by the state. At the same time, multiculturalism has further invisibilized *mestizo campesino* identities and created new types of tensions, as it emphasizes "ethnic" or "cultural" difference at the expense of class-based difference (Bretón, 2008; Fontana, 2014). Consequently, multicultural approaches often do not challenge racial and classed hierarchies that marginalize rural populations but instead operate

[7] For an analysis of historical racialization in Nicaragua, see, e.g., Offen (2010), Wolfe (2010).

within structures and institutions that privilege whiteness (Hale, 2002; Speed, 2017). In other words, "these policies did not deal with the fundamental problem that under neoliberalism peasant producers and indigenous peoples are considered redundant by capital" (Bretón *et al*., 2022, p. 570).

As discussed above, processes of racialization are fundamentally spatial (Kobayashi & Peake, 2000). Multicultural reforms further racialize space and naturalize difference, for instance, through indigenous land titling programs (Mollett, 2016; Offen, 2003). Bocarejo (2009, p. 307) describes multiculturalism as a "deceptive utopia" based on "the fixation of ethnicity in a territory and the creation of strong frontiers – both physical and symbolic – between grantees and nongrantees of differential citizenships." It has essentialized identities, concealing racial heterogeneity and processes of racialization in "ethnic" territories (Noroña, 2022). That is, partial recognition produces racialized difference, fixing indigeneity spatially and sedimenting the indigenous/non-indigenous binary that glosses over other axes of social difference. Hence, as Peluso (2008, p. 56) notes, "[n]otions of 'majorities', 'minorities', 'indigenous' and 'migrants' are territorially scaled." This spatialization of race is evident in Bocarejo & Ojeda's (2016) observation that peasants' categorization as non-indigenous *colonos* in Tayrona, Colombia, has rendered them out of place, leading to their exclusion from the territories they inhabit. The spatialized, racialized, and classed construction of "non-ethnic *colonos*" delegitimizes their identities and belonging. In the Latin American context, the label "*colono*" thus carries specific class and racial weight that cannot be reduced simply to a "settler."

These dynamics are evident in Nicaragua, where indigenous land titling has further racialized space. Multicultural reforms were implemented as part of the peace accords to end the 1980s civil war and institutionalized by the 1987 Autonomy Statute (Bretón *et al*., 2022). The World Bank later financed land titling at the request of the neoliberal governments of Arnoldo Alemán and Enrique Bolaños, leading to the passage of the 2003 Communal Lands Law 445. Yet, to Hooker (2005a, p. 38), "mestizo multiculturalism . . . simultaneously recognizes [Nicaragua's] racial and cultural diversity and reinscribes it within the trope of mestizaje." She suggests that the lack of full implementation of multicultural rights speaks to the persistence of *mestizo* nationalism (see also Cunningham Kain, 2008). Thus, while it is no longer claimed that all Nicaraguans are *mestizo*, the idea that the *nation* is *mestizo* prevails. The multicultural turn takes the "unmarked *mestizo*" category for granted, and the production of indigenous and black otherness further solidifies it. At the same time, multicultural partial recognition has further reinforced the spatial-racial separation of the Pacific and Caribbean Coasts, reinforcing the "non-indigenous" status as a marker of non-belonging and exclusion within the Caribbean Coast, where state-sanctioned understandings of indigeneity are often positioned as a prerequisite for rights and resource access (see Williams, 2016). Thus, it has further rendered *mestizo* peasants as *colonos*.

This conceptual lens thus does not deny that indigenous people are in a structurally more vulnerable position than *mestizos* (see Cunningham Kain, 2008). Instead, I suggest that pitting essentialized *mestizo* and indigenous groups against each other leads to the simplified "interethnic" framing of territorial conflicts, obscuring the complexities of how the colonization of indigenous territories occurs. In the following sections, I complicate the homogenizing constructions of the *mestizo* category by drawing on my empirical data to show how race, class, and space shape the lived experiences of *mestizo campesinos* in Bosawas. Moreover, I discuss how this homogenization works to conceal the underlying political-economic drivers of territorial conflicts.

4. Intersectional experiences in Bosawas

Colonos *as "*mestizos*"*

Dominant discourses often bundle all *mestizo*s, with media accounts describing how "[d]ozens of Indigenous people on Nicaragua's eastern Caribbean coast have been killed in recent years by *cattle ranchers and other settlers* who are encroaching on the country's rainforest" (Halverson, 2020, emphasis added). Settlers are described as "heavily armed" (Ernst, 2021), "assailants who use kidnappings and killings to push people off their land" (AP, 2023) in their search for "lucrative" resources and land (Robles, 2016). *La Prensa* (2021), quoting environmentalist Amaru Ruiz, states that *colonos* "are willing to do anything to make [indigenous people] leave their territories… we're talking about people who are not right in the head, who have a high level of hatred."

The "interethnic" framing is evident in how settlers are explicitly labeled as "mestizos*,* Nicaraguans of mixed Spanish-native American descent" (Galanova, 2017). *Mestizo* is defined as "a Spanish term for people who form the ethnic majority population of Nicaragua and other Latin American countries, who speak Spanish, and do not ascribe to a particular Indigenous culture or tribe" (Volckhausen, 2019), highlighting the category's unmarkedness. Discourses reproduce the indigenous/*mestizo* binary by contrasting settlers' "modern," damaging culture to the "traditional" customs of indigenous people, without unpacking the underlying ontologies: *colonos* are described as people who mainly engage with "timber extraction, cattle ranching, artisanal mining, and the cultivation of African palm and cacao" (Medina Sánchez, 2020). They are said to "appropriate [indigenous] lands for indiscriminate use of natural resources in agricultural and livestock activities" (López, 2020).

Similarly, government and development organization representatives often associated settlers with a "*mestizo* way of living:" "There are two contradictory models, two contradictory cultures… *Mestizos* want to modify land, take indigenous land" (interview 2015, Alejandro, NGO officer). Colonization narratives thus reproduce a uniform *mestizo* experience, doing little to separate peasants from *mestizo* elites. This approach differs from discourses in other settings that often evoke class status, contrasting peasants with hegemonic actors (see Devine *et al*., 2020). Even when the diversity of "*mestizos*" is recognized, differences in power and impact are glossed over: "There are all types of *colonos*: from *campesinos* who have been deceived by sellers of other people's land to ex-military and large landowners who have appropriated 'farms' of up to 10,000 *manzanas* [7,000 ha]" (A. del Cid, 2020). As V. Del Cid (2015, p. 97–98), a former government representative of indigenous affairs, suggests, there is a sentiment that being *mestizo* makes settlers powerful: "The *mestizo* settler who invades a Mayangna territory… does it with the conscience that he [sic] is part of the dominant [group], it doesn't matter if he is a rich landowner or a poor peasant." Thus, "*campesino*" does not emerge as a political subject in the context of "interethnic" conflicts: *campesinos* are unable to mobilize their class-based identity on the Caribbean Coast, as their racialization bundles them together with elite *mestizos*, pointing to the elusiveness of peasant space and identity (see Ojeda & González, 2018).

Mestizo campesinos, too, carefully distinguish themselves from indigenous communities, reflecting continuing racism and indigenous othering (see Bobrow-Strain, 2007, for a similar discussion in Mexico). Many I spoke with emphasized that they are Nicaraguan, implicitly placing indigenous people outside the nation. Racialized sentiments associated with productivity were evident in *campesino* Eddy's statement: "Because it's the *mestizo* who works; they [the Mayangna] are not good at working" (interview 2018). In this way, *campesinos* perform proximity to whiteness as productivity and individualism to seek social mobility, framing themselves as Nicaraguan citizens

and as protagonists of progress who bring civilization to "empty" spaces (see Gámez, 2025; Soto Joya, 2011). This racialized identity is often evoked at the expense of class identity, which makes it difficult to craft alliances with indigenous communities to resist marginalizing policies advocated for by *mestizo* elites, showing how "[e]veryday forms of whiteness are used to cement moral barriers between people with the same socioeconomic position and who would, hence, otherwise greatly benefit from collective political action" (Ceron-Anaya et al., 2023, p. 183).

Still, my research participants contested homogenizing portrayals of *mestizos*. Community leader Salvador said: "I was born in the countryside, I grew up in the countryside, and I continue to live here, so how should I identify? I was born a *campesino"* (interview 2017). He and others contrasted their *campesino* self-identification with landowning classes, illustrating the contextuality of privilege. "So, look at the policies," Carlos told me, "they don't benefit a small producer, *campesino*, in anything. One must accept that" (interview 2018, Carlos, *campesino*). Instead, political emphasis and support prioritize large-scale agricultural production and extractivism, including cattle ranching and gold mining (see Mayer, 2021).

It is crucial to note that *campesino*, too, is a heterogeneous category (Ojeda & González, 2018), and some *campesinos* in Bosawas live relatively well. They often distanced themselves from the poorest, showing how identity constructions are classed. A couple said:

> [Justo:] Yesterday, I saw a poor woman there; she has nothing. She's squatting there… But with those people, one can't talk.
> [María:] Yes, they are very timid (interview 2017, a community leader and ex-soldier, and his wife).

On the other hand, most large-scale landowners, land speculators, and cattle ranchers – who also identify as *mestizos* – do not live in the territory but hire *campesinos* to maintain their *fincas*. They see cheap, untaxable land as an investment opportunity, exploiting weak indigenous territorial security and their racial and class privilege. As Oscar (interview 2018), a community leader and ex-soldier, put it, "there are many powerful actors, including large cattle ranchers, here."

Hence, the racialized and classed identities of *mestizo campesinos* intersect in complex ways in Bosawas. For many, land use is driven by necessity rather than inherent extractive "*mestizo* ontologies." In other words, marginalized *campesinos* often internalize colonial power structures and participate in internal colonialism to survive, being simultaneously oppressors and oppressed (see Gámez *et al*., 2025). They are part of the racialized dynamics of the colonization of indigenous territories, yet marginalized by their class positions. As I show in the next section, these intersections render *mestizo campesinos* ineligible for support that *mestizo* elites and *campesinos* elsewhere might have access to.

Campesinos *and the State*

The homogenizing narratives described above reveal how the complex realities of *campesinos* often go unacknowledged. These discourses portray settlers as being supported by the state and capital, which, in other contexts, would be framed as antagonistic to *campesino* identities. They are described as facilitating the territorialization efforts of political-economic elites as "agents of a large-scale land grab" (Parker, 2016). Herlihy (2016) describes how "Spanish-speaking mestizo colonos… invad[e] Nicaragua's Caribbean coast — often at the behest of the country's lauded cattle-ranching class and with the tacit support of the Nicaraguan state," conflating race and class.

Indeed, the state has used the Caribbean Coast as an escape valve for dispossessed smallholders, resettling them on the Coast and its indigenous territories during, for instance, the dictator Somoza's era (1935-1979), agrarian reforms, and after the 1980s civil war (Cuéllar & Kandel, 2005; Rueda Estrada, 2013). By reproducing the "national lands" trope, these efforts have reflected elite interests and acted as a spatial fix, aiming to incorporate "marginal" indigenous lands into capitalist relations on the one hand and to make space for agro-extractivist activities on the Pacific Coast on the other (Finley-Brook & Offen, 2009; Gonda *et al*., 2023). Simultaneously, they have also legitimized dispossession on the Pacific Coast by providing displaced *campesinos* with "empty" land to settle on.

However, the dominant narrative ignores the differentiated distribution and nature of assistance. While state policies have dispossessed *mestizo* peasants, they have undoubtedly helped other "*mestizo*" actors – including cattle ranchers and logging and mining companies – by providing them with incentives to operate on the "unproductive" and "indigenous" Caribbean Coast. The accounts of *mestizo* peasants in Mayangna Sauni Bas reflect this unevenness. Most *campesino* houses are made of wood, mud, or plastic and have no electricity. Families often have no latrines, and most houses have dirt floors and open stoves. The settlements are difficult to reach: "Riding a mule, we're about five to seven hours from a major road," said Andy, a *campesino* (interview 2018).

Institutional presence is scarce, and people claimed they received no support from the government or its food security and housing programs. David told me that "the social programs… like *Plan Techo*, *Usura Cero*… *Bono Productivo*; none… enter here" (interview 2018, David, *campesino*). Particularly problematic is the lack of access to education and healthcare. A health care center was at least a 3-hour mule ride away from most places. Eduardo, a *campesino*, said the closest school was 40 minutes from his community. It was run by the residents, with no support from the Ministry for Education. In another village, the community's 80 school-aged children had not attended classes for more than three years. The lack of schooling was not limited to children; most adults had not completed primary school. Sergio, a *mestizo* leader, estimated that 80% of his community members could not read (interview 2019). José, a *campesino,* could not provide an estimate, but when asked whether his community had many illiterate people, he responded, "Of course" (interview 2018). GIZ data on *mestizos* in Mayangna Sauni Bas in 2003 show that of the 346 adults surveyed, 62.4% could not read or write.

Overall, feelings of abandonment were ubiquitous. People felt they were a nuisance nobody wanted to deal with: "We've been denied the right to healthcare, education, loans, many things that a producer sometimes has access to" (Carlos, *campesino*, interview 2018). Rosa, a *campesina*, stated: "We're abandoned… no small or large [actors] have come" (interview 2018). In another village, people agreed: "There is no [assistance]… We are peasants, they don't help us, we're lowly" (Chepe, *campesino*, interview 2018). Many connected the lack of institutional presence to insecurity, criminal activity, and territorial conflicts. A *mestizo* pastor said: "The biggest problem is crime… last night, they killed a guy there… and nobody came to see… It's normal" (Erik, interview 2017).

Some would have preferred to stay in their places of origin. When I asked Martha, a *campesina*, whether she liked living in Bosawas, she snickered and said: "*Aquí estamos*" ["Here we are"] (interview 2018). 18-year-old Ana, whose husband had bought a piece of land from his uncle, put it more bluntly: "Here, we have nothing" (interview 2018). Yet, they had decided to relocate, as they had been landless (in Martha's case) or forced to sell their plot (in Ana's case).

There was also resentment related to what was perceived as an ethnic distribution of land. Community leader Norman said "I've told [Mayangna leaders] 'I congratulate you for being considered by the government, you're the owners of your territory, your resources. While we, *mestizos,* are not.' We must look for where to live, but they have a territory assigned to them"

(interview 2019). Finally, many settlers are ex-combatants, thousands of whom were resettled in Bosawas after the 1980s civil war on lands reconceptualized as "national" despite the 1987 Autonomy Statute (Kaimowitz & Fauné, 2003). Abu-Lughod (2000) notes that resettlement policies were implemented to appease ex-soldiers; yet they were often placed in remote regions with no services. Indeed, the ex-combatants I talked to were particularly frustrated with state abandonment, resulting in many selling their lots, often to land traffickers or cattle ranchers. Oscar, who lost his original *finca* during the war, said: "Here, life for us, combatants… has been tough; the fight has been tough" (interview 2018). Moreover, their presence contributes to the framing of settlers as heavily armed or "paramilitary." These observations contrast with narratives that suggest that government allies actively support all settlers. Similarly, NGO representatives I interviewed said they did not assist *mestizos* in indigenous territories. A development worker said: "If you support *mestizos* who are illegally in an indigenous territory, in the core zone of the [Bosawas] reserve, you are enabling their behavior" (interview 2019). These findings mirror systemic patterns found by Williams (2016) on the Southern Caribbean Coast, where development and state organizations often exclude *mestizos* from extension work and legal protections, institutionalizing their non-belonging and precariousness.

At the same time, while dominant discourses construct indigenous communities as victims of state-sanctioned extractivist violence, *mestizos* are rendered part of these dynamics. Conflating capitalist productivity with *mestizo* identity obscures how the historical and contemporary emphasis on extractivism and large-scale agriculture drives the marginalization and uprooting of rural lives. While depriving "*mestizo*" smallholders of social services on the Caribbean Coast, the "*mestizo*" state lays its claims on these landscapes and actively benefits from them. Like many "post-neoliberal" states in Latin America, Nicaragua continues to implement policies that prioritize extractivism over *campesino* well-being, despite the Sandinista government's self-proclaimed socialist orientation (Goett, 2016; Gonda *et al*., 2023; Martí i Puig & Baumeister, 2017). Many *campesinos* I talked to had been displaced from other contexts by agroindustry and the difficulty of competing as peasants. As my analysis demonstrates, they struggle to access land, credit, and fair prices for agricultural products. These dynamics push them to the indigenous territories of Bosawas in a way that is distinctly racialized and classed. The situation resembles what Ojeda & González (2018, p. 90) describe in Colombia, where "violence of an ongoing, massive counter-agrarian reform [is] legitimated in the name of development."

The presence of *mestizo campesinos* in Bosawas has thus been shaped by the marginalization of rural lives, suggesting that *mestizo* privilege can be constrained by class positions. Indeed, as González (2017) points out, many settlers are "precisely a result of an exclusionary model of accumulation, not its agents." In this way, the state simultaneously exalts and denigrates the *campesino* subject by using it to colonize indigenous territories, while refusing to provide it with support (Soto Joya, 2011). In the next section, I discuss how these race-class intersections shape land tenure and access.

Unequal land tenure: Dominant representations vs. material realities

The dominant narratives that frame *colonos* as a monolithic group stealing indigenous lands obscure how unequal land distribution is a key driver of territorial conflicts in rural Latin America (Renfrew, 2011). In Nicaragua, too, land has historically been consolidated in the hands of elites. While the 1980s Sandinista agrarian reform temporarily alleviated the situation, policies implemented since the 1990s by neoliberal governments have reconcentrated land, compromising peasants' access to it and reinstating social hierarchies that further marginalize *campesinos* (Aguilar-Støen, 2016; Radel *et al*., 2018; Soto Joya, 2011). Dennis, a government official, told me that "in the 1990s, the

neoliberal governments… Their agrarian counter-reform disarticulated agricultural cooperatives.… And [large] landowners bought more land…" (interview 2016).

Similar dynamics apply for land reserved for extractivism. For instance, between 1994 and 1998, over 75% of the territory in the municipality of Siuna, which is situated in Nicaragua's historical "mining triangle" and hosts the closest town to Mayangna Sauni Bas, was granted to foreign mining companies (Rueda Estrada, 2013). The situation has not been alleviated by the fact that gold has, in recent years, become Nicaragua's most important export product, and 60% of the national territory has been designated available for gold mining concessions (Ministerio de Energía y Minas, 2023). Between 2006 and 2020, concessions increased by 74.7%, and indigenous communities have flagged how mining compromises their territorial rights (OPIA, 2023). Yet, dominant discourses that blame colonization on *mestizo campesinos* rarely consider these dynamics.

Unequal land ownership is evident in Bosawas, even in areas where large corporations are still absent. GIZ data from 2010 show that the 236 settler families surveyed collectively claimed 15,900 *manzanas* (11,200 hectares) in Mayangna Sauni Bas, which corresponds to 25% of the territory. However, the top 10% possessed almost 45% of this land, whereas the bottom 50% held only 8%. Thus, while dominant accounts emphasize the massive scale of invasion, land claimed by *mestizos* in Mayangna Sauni Bas varies drastically. For instance, according to Mayangna leaders, the liberal (not Sandinista) then-mayor of Siuna claimed 380 *manzanas* (268 ha) in the territory. Rodolfo, a GTI member, said "the mayor herself… invades indigenous territory within a protected area" (interview 2017). Similarly, a former liberal political secretary "owned" 250 *manzanas* (176 ha). *Mestizo* leader and ex-combatant Oscar's family had 200 *manzanas* (141 ha). Yet, many *campesinos* were squatting or caring for someone else's land. Some were brought there by cattle ranchers living elsewhere. Others had a few *manzanas*, and many commented on how landholding size correlated with socioeconomic status: "There are poor people looking for one *manzana*, two *manzanas*" (Jorge, *campesino*, interview 2018).

Dominant discourses suggest that settlers take land by force, "[raise cattle] on stolen land" (Rautner & Cuffe 2020), and have been "stealing indigenous lands in the northeast since 2010" (Downs 2015). While this is sometimes the case, land ownership in Bosawas is more complex than is generally acknowledged, as noted above. In Mayangna Sauni Bas, most settlers have bought their lots informally, while earlier, people also invaded land and later sold it to others. Due to the spatial-racial constructions, *mestizo campesinos* cannot officially buy land in Bosawas. Yet informal sales arrangements are common and include contracts, often signed by lawyers, verbal agreements, and permits granted by former GTIs. A few parcels have agrarian reform titles issued before 1987 that authorize their holders to remain on the land. However, most reform titles have been sold to new owners, invalidating them under Law 445.

Both *mestizo* and Mayangna actors have been complicit in illegal sales. I talked to a settler who insisted he had a document signed by Mayangna leaders allowing him to stay. A *mestizo* leader agreed that "the biggest problem is, I'm sorry, the permits granted by the Mayangna" (Octavio, interview 2018). Juan, a *campesino,* said: "They sell, negotiate lands, and then send the army to incarcerate the buyers. And then they sell to another" (interview 2018). Another *campesino*, Chepe, stated: "…[T]hey blame *mestizos* for invading their lands, but they are to blame, as they bring people in" (interview 2018). Mayangna leaders admitted these sales, suggesting that former GTIs had sold land to *colonos* because "[t]hey didn't care about the territory but were looking for personal benefits… *Colonos* gave them drinks, befriended them so they could enter" (Romel, GTI member, interview 2017). However, recent GTI presidents insisted they had not participated in sales but had instead been actively identifying land traffickers (Interviews 2016 and 2023).

At the same time, land sales by the Mayangna attest to racial hierarchies and indigenous marginalization. A professor at URACCAN (University of the Autonomous Regions of the Nicaraguan Caribbean Coast) asked,

> Do you know when most of the land was sold? When indigenous people thought they'd never get their titles… They gave up: 'This was my dream; it will never become a reality.' So, the only way to benefit from [land]… It's a process of despair; they started selling. (Marlon, interview 2015)

Mestizos, too, have sold vast amounts of indigenous lands, and the number of land speculators has skyrocketed. "It's honestly a mafia," Enrique, a *campesino*, said to me (interview 2018). While wealthy *mestizos* and extractivist interests profit from land sales, for *campesinos*, buying a plot in Bosawas can be the only way to acquire land. The lack of infrastructure and the illegality of land sales due to the indigenous territory *qua* protected area status mean that land is relatively affordable. Thus, the settlement of peasants in Bosawas is often shaped by their class positions that are vulnerable to displacement, which drives them to the lands racialized as "empty." As the director of an indigenous development organization suggested, "It is related to poverty… If you have a displaced family, be it for cattle or coffee, or land grabs, people go there [Bosawas]" (Ronaldo, interview 2016).

However, *campesinos*' landholding*s* are precarious. While dominant narratives suggest that the state does "nothing" to resolve territorial conflicts (e.g., Munguía, 2020), *campesinos* frequently face threats of displacement through *saneamiento*. Many interviewees feared they could be evicted at any time, sparking deep resentment. As Orlando, a *campesino*, pointed out: "Those families… bought and didn't know… And the poor people who have invested all their work and effort… And now they'll evict them… families with children… Where will they go?" (interview 2018). Kevin, a *campesino*, said that 18 of 24 families had left his village due to constant eviction threats. An army unit, the Ecological Battalion [*Batallón Ecológico*], had burnt down their houses, and they were now squatting nearby. Juan, a *campesino*, said: "The threat is constant" (interview 2017). Another *campesino*, Sebastian, stated that "If my kids get married, I want to tell them, '[I give] five manzanas to each of you.' But I can't do that legally… I've lived here for twenty years, invested everything I have … I don't feel secure. The government can force me to leave at any time" (interview, 2017).

At the same time, the then-mayor of Siuna, who had a house in the territory, denied the existence of conflicts: "We don't have conflicts... Because there is respect… We love our Mayangna community" (Dilma, interview 2018). While her statement clearly does not correspond to the lived experiences of *mestizo campesinos* or Mayangna community members, it might be true for her, considering the protection provided by her race-class position. Indeed, land speculators and elites are generally protected from evictions through *saneamiento*, which has focused on smallholders. Moreover, elites use their intersectional positions to navigate ownership dynamics and state institutions, often having political connections and more formal titles. Byron, a community leader, said: "When they [the government] come with restrictions, it's the humblest who suffer" (interview 2018). An URACCAN professor agreed: "[I]t is necessary to start with the big ones, and they are protected… They want to evict the easiest" (Marlon, interview 2015).

As Bocarejo (2009, p. 321) argues, land is often acquired from "smallholders who have themselves lived at the margins of the state and have intricate stories of displacement and violence." In Bosawas, peasants selling their lots has led to further land concentration to cattle ranchers and agro-extractivist industries who benefit from *campesino* precarity: "[A cattle rancher] came and talked to *colonos*… He bought land from many people with small lots… and then registered those

lands with titles" (Ricardo, a *mestizo* leader, interview 2018). This land accumulation also increases the power of elites to shape landscapes in ways that serve capital's interests and alter social relations and environments (Sánchez García & Wong, 2024). Thus, failing to distinguish between *campesinos* and more powerful "*mestizo*" actors legitimizes peasant evictions and gives the impression that something is being done to address territorial conflicts and the colonization of indigenous lands, while simultaneously securing extractivist interests. In other words, the dominant discourses and policies make peasants the visible, expendable face of "indiscriminate use of natural resources" while the large-scale drivers of extractivism remain protected.

The differentiated distribution and precarity of land holdings illustrate how *mestizo* privilege intersects with class. At the same time, this privilege is evident in how *mestizo* elites and companies are protected from displacement. In the next section, I discuss how discursive and material constructions of space shape these intersectional positions.

*The "*colono*" as a racial-spatial construct*

Dominant accounts evoke a narrative that frames *campesinos* as "*colonos*," colonizers. Parallels to colonial histories are common. Parker (2017) describes settlers as "mestizo imperialist[s]… terrorizing Nicaragua's indigenous communities" and the attacks as "senseless, colonial, greed-fueled violence" and "cold-blooded colonialism." Similarly, Downs (2015) claims that *colonos* are "Just Like the Spaniards." Moreover, articles explaining how Bosawas is being "invaded and destroyed by mestizos originating from the Pacific Coast and central areas" (Silva, 2013) reproduce the separation between the "indigenous" Caribbean and "*mestizo*" Pacific Coasts. Similarly, most government and NGO officials I interviewed suggested that *colonos* were migrants originating from the "*mestizo*" areas of Nicaragua.

The conflation of "*colonos*" with "imperialists" and "Spaniards" reproduces the internal colonial logic that is intimately tied to the Nicaraguan nation-building project, *mestizaje,* and partial multicultural recognition that have produced the "*mestizo-colono*" subject. It is a racial-spatial tactic that bundles the dispossessed rural poor with cattle ranchers, land traffickers, and extractivist interests, effectively erasing the peasant identity of the former and delegitimizing their presence as "out-of-place" *mestizo colonos* on the Caribbean Coast (see Bocarejo & Ojeda, 2016). This framing obscures the fact that many have lived on the Coast for some time – sometimes for generations – due to state-sanctioned resettlement policies, displacement, and agricultural and extractivist employment (Cuéllar & Kandel, 2005; Rueda Estrada, 2013). I spoke to peasants who had migrated to Bosawas from nearby rural communities in Siuna or other municipalities in the RACCN. Those from central Nicaragua were often from Río Blanco, a town bordering the Caribbean Coast. Ángel, a community priest, had moved from Río Blanco eight years earlier, and his community had "people who were born [there], people who migrated from elsewhere, and people who had lived in the area for long, thirty years or more" (interview, 2019). None of the smallholder *campesinos* I talked to reported coming from the Pacific Coast municipalities, although many absent large-scale landowners and cattle ranchers were from those areas. Yet, the "*mestizo*" identity fixes *campesinos* spatially to the Pacific Coast. At the same time, by framing them as "migrants" and "*colonos,*" the dominant narrative erases any claims they have to land, making the "*mestizo-colono*" label their primary social and legal identifier.

Dominant discourses suggest that *colonos* are "often *mestizo* fellow Nicaraguans who are looking to exploit Indigenous land for their own benefit" (Lozano, 2023). Others describe them as "settlers, land invaders from other regions of the country who use violence to expand cattle-ranching, extensive agriculture, and African palm plantations" (Maldonado, 2023). While these accounts bundle all *mestizos* together as settlers, they also evoke "*colono*" as a "category based on class, race/ethnicity,

gender and regional origin" (Ojeda 2012, p. 358). This classed/racialized/spatial construction of "*colono*" is evident in how the "*colonos*" featured in dominant accounts are almost always *campesinos,* and much less attention is paid to other "*mestizo*" actors.

Moreover, as *mestizo* presence on the Caribbean Coast is generally understood through histories of capitalist development, the construction of Bosawas as a protected area discursively alienates "extractive" *mestizos* from the reserve. That is, the legal spatiality of Bosawas renders it an incontestable space, hiding the politicization of this configuration from view. Space thus acts as an essential factor in shaping intersectional identities (Rodó-de-Zárate & Baylina, 2018), and the construction of *mestizo* subjects hinges on racialized understandings of space cemented by *mestizaje* and multicultural discourses. In Bosawas, the "*colono mestizo*" category becomes visible when peasants enter socioenvironmental conflicts in indigenous territories, that is, in relation to indigeneity, space, and nature (see Moreno Figueroa, 2010; Nightingale, 2011). In other words, in these situations, "…seemingly non-ethnic communities are socially marked in relation to the natures they inhabit and produce" in ways that shape belonging and non-belonging (Ojeda 2012, p. 359). In this way, the *colono* label is an example of how racialization and racial hierarchies are produced and reproduced in land struggles, highlighting the plasticity of racial categories and how land conflicts are not technical disputes over boundaries but are produced by the socio-political configuration of territory (see Williams, 2016).

Simultaneously, the "*mestizo colono*" category reproduces the othering of indigenous and Afro-descendant communities, reinforcing the marginalization of the Caribbean Coast as an "indigenous" and "exploitable" space. The intersections of class, race, and space thus make indigenous communities multiply vulnerable to colonization, violence, and extractivism. While *mestizo* elites continue to take advantage of the "unproductive" Caribbean Coast and its natural resources, *mestizo campesinos* are also part of these racialized dynamics whereby they settle in the agricultural frontier based on the Coast's framing as "empty," rendering indigenous territories compatible with state logics of productivity and economic rationality (see Gonda *et al.,* 2023; Mollett, 2016; Vela-Almeida, 2020). Thus, the intersections of race, class, and space play out in distinctly different ways for *mestizo* elites, *mestizo* peasants, and indigenous and Afro-descendant communities.

5. Discussion and conclusion

This article has attempted to complicate dominant narratives of "interethnic" territorial conflicts in Nicaragua. I have drawn attention to how the "*mestizo"* category, produced as homogeneous through racializing discourses, ignores axes of difference and does not correspond to the lived realities of all "*mestizos*" – particularly of those who identify as *campesinos*. Hence, it does not account for "the multiplicity of ways in which power and subjectivity intersect" (Nayak 2007, p. 745).

These discursive constructions shape both the identity and the material exclusion of *campesinos*. As I have shown, there are drastic differences in the living conditions of *mestizos* in Mayangna Sauni Bas, and many *mestizo campesinos* live at the class and space-based margins of the "*mestizo*" society despite their racial privilege. As *campesino* subjects emerge in context-specific ways (Devine *et al*., 2020), the "interethnic" territorial conflict framing conceals the subjectivities of *mestizo campesinos* and erases their peasantry from sight. Furthermore, labeling them as "racially and ethnically unmarked" *mestizos* makes it challenging to forge a collective identity that would grant them, for example, land rights (Ojeda 2012, p. 367). Thus, *mestizo campesinos* cannot always fully operationalize their *mestizo* privilege, and they may lack access to the provisions afforded to peasant groups in other spaces or to the class privilege of *mestizo* elites. The erasure of the peasantry is also

evident in the near-complete absence of *campesino* voices in news articles about the conflicts, while *campesinos* are simultaneously featured as the faces of colonization.

While "*mestizo*-ness" generally remains an unmarked position, it becomes visible, often as *colono*, when *mestizo* peasants enter into politico-ecological and spatial relations in indigenous territories, as their identity constructions are shaped by indigenous othering and contestations over land and resources (see Moreno Figueroa, 2010; Sundberg, 2017). In dominant narratives, *campesinos* become constituted as part of a *mestizo* apparatus, based on extractivist *mestizo* ontologies, that unashamedly colonizes indigenous territories, particularly as their identities intersect with the racial-spatial productions of the Caribbean Coast. This construction of *mestizo* as a homogeneous category, or the "mythic homogeneity" of the *mestizo*, has important implications because it justifies state violence and the exclusion of *mestizo campesinos* and makes policies targeting them, rather than addressing the underlying political-economic structures, appear as an attractive solution to territorial conflicts. As currently implemented, these policies ignore the many "*mestizo*" peasants who have been marginalized and displaced by "*mestizo*" political and economic spheres, obscuring how "social difference shapes access to land, livelihood opportunities, and resources" (Vaz-Jones 2018, p. 728). This discourse hides the reality that wealthy *mestizos* and elites are the primary agents of large-scale, capital-driven landscape change. It bundles diverse rural actors into the singular, racialized category of "*colono*" to facilitate state legibility and extraction while masking the internal colonial logic that treats the Caribbean Coast as a site for modernization.

In contrast, *mestizo* elites are generally protected from displacement due to their intersectional positions. These proposed solutions, then, blame colonization on *mestizo campesinos* while leaving the broader *mestizo* structural privilege unchallenged. That is, they do not tackle the racial thinking and racism and the broader devaluation of indigeneity and blackness that continue to drive the migration to and exploitation of indigenous and Afro-descendant territories, nor do they address the role of extractivism and large-scale agriculture in marginalizing rural lives. Instead, they detach the current conflicts from the histories of classed and racialized access to land and resources, conceptualizing territorial conflicts as "an outcome of incompatibility among protagonists, rather than as a process through which incompatibility emerges" (Le Billon & Duffy, 2018, p. 242). At the same time, the multicultural turn requires indigenous groups to assert their cultural difference to qualify for rights as "ethnic subjects" rather than forge class-based alliances against elites, despite relationships and mutual exchanges between some Mayangna and *mestizo* actors in Bosawas (see Bretón *et al*., 2022).

Through a political ecology lens, territorial conflicts can be understood as a form of resistance stemming from the historical production and configuration of landscapes and territories (see Bobrow-Strain, 2007; Paredes & Kaulard, 2023; Vela-Almeida, 2020). Devine *et al*. (2020, p. 16) point out that "when peasants battle for the territory, they battle for their intrinsic rights to live a dignified life, a life worth living." Indeed, peasants explicitly contest the "*mestizo colono*" portrayal by identifying as "*campesinos*" or "small producers," a class-based identity that centers the right to live their lives and resists the production and configuration of territory that prioritizes capital over people (see Soto Joya, 2011). Many interviewees emphasized that even if they lived in an indigenous territory and a protected area, they should not be deprived of fundamental human rights: "[W]e are in an area that we must respect. But we must claim some rights… so that we can live in peace" (interview 2018, Juan, *campesino*).

My purpose has not been to "render [race-based] inequalities invisible." To the contrary, racial logics are key to understanding the invasion of indigenous territories (Mollett, 2016; Rodó-de-Zárate & Baylina, 2018, p. 551). Instead, I have highlighted the co-production of racial, class, and spatial dynamics, suggesting that it is necessary to counter the essentialization of the *mestizo* category to

understand the contextuality of privilege and whiteness (Ceron-Anaya et al., 2023; Moreno Figueroa, 2010). These findings encourage political ecologists to unsettle the constructions of "unmarked" identities and their materiality, in addition to the more traditional focus on indigenous identities, to understand how dominant narratives are used to justify the marginalization of both indigenous communities and the rural poor, facilitating state-led displacement and protecting elite privilege. These inquiries are crucial because, ultimately, treating the *mestizo* identity as essential and normal can impede efforts to achieve racial justice by enabling the continued marginalization of indigenous communities and upholding persistent racial hierarchies in *mestizo* societies.

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