# "Racism Lives in a Sleeping Way": Afro-Nicaraguan Feminist Critiques of Multiethnic Discourses in Nicaragua

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**Abstract**: This paper explores how Afro-Nicaraguan women activists and intellectuals are struggling to disrupt and transform celebratory discourses of multi-ethnicity that obscure the reality of racism on the Atlantic Coast. I delineate the contradictions that Afro-Nicaraguan women activists confront in struggles for racial and gender justice and argue that they are crafting an oppositional discourse of intersectional oppression (Woods, 2005; Lorde, 1984; Collins, 2000). Using ethnographic analysis, I unveil the politics of racial ambiguity and cultural difference embedded in myths of multicultural inclusion in Nicaragua. I have found ethnography to be a particularly useful tool in revealing the persistence of the multicultural myth precisely because it demonstrates the ways in which state discourses of celebratory multiculturalism and the everyday realities of race and ethnicity on the Atlantic Coast parallel and diverge from one another. I demonstrate how this myth holds true even in Nicaraguan feminist politics by analyzing the silencing of Afro-Nicaraguan feminist critiques of multiculturalism at a multiethnic women's *foro*. During the *foro*, I witnessed how a Creole feminist intellectual who attempted to articulate an intersectional analysis was criticized for creating division in an otherwise harmonious political space. Mestiza participants attacked what they perceived to be a disruptive discourse that deflected attention from the shared experiences of "all women." This response reflects larger patterns of "multiethnic" homogenizing practices that downplay the particularity of intersecting oppressions on differently racialized women. This essay critiques how celebratory discourses of "multi-ethnicity" obscure racist social and political hierarchies and Mestizo hegemony. It also analyzes how Afro-costeña activists are modifying intersectional analyses grounded in North American Black feminist theory. This research provides a critical intervention that can broaden understandings of Afro-diasporic women's activism and how social conditions facilitate their politicized responses to racialized/gendered oppressions.

***1st Annual Multiethnic Women's Foro***

As is often the case with most research, my participation in the First Annual Multiethnic Women's Foro came about largely as the result of serendipity. I awoke early that morning and groggily hailed a taxicab to carry me to the Universidad de las Regiones Autonomas de la Costa Caribe de Nicaragua (URACCAN) located on the outskirts of Bluefields, the largest town and capital city of the South Atlantic Autonomous Region (RAAS). Upon arriving I was surprised to find a groundbreaking attempt to bring together women from throughout the region to discuss issues relevant to their lives as costeñas. Sponsored by the Red Intersectorial de Mujeres contra la Violencia (Network of Women Against Violence), approximately 130 women participated in the two-day foro exploring issues ranging from "la mujer y el medio ambiente" to "la mujer y la educación" to presentations on reproductive and sexual health. (*note: consider the uncritical use of "woman" as though it were a monolithic, transparent, self-evident category*)

As I entered the crowded meeting hall where the opening plenary was taking place, I was amazed to see the diversity of the participants. Women of different ethnicities clustered together in small groups, speaking excitedly in Spanish, Creole English, and Miskitu, anxiously waiting for the conference activities to resume. Finally, the opening speaker, a short, middle-aged Mestiza, arrived and began her presentation on violence against women in Nicaragua. I noticed that her presentation was based on research that she had conducted in León, a mid-sized town located on the Pacific side of the nation. It was home to a largely mestizo population and as far as I knew, there were no significant Black or indigenous communities in León, but like many of the participants at the foro, I was so excited to be there that I shrugged off the oversight.

It became increasingly more difficult, however, to shrug off the erasure of racial and cultural difference at this multiethnic *foro* as the day wore on. I watched multiple presentations and speakers and found no analysis of race, difference, or inequality. Curiously, discussions of women, ethnicity, race, identity, or discrimination were absent from the numerous panel presentations/discussions. Moreover, despite the fact that the *foro* was "multiethnic" the

proceedings were solidly monolingual – the entire conference proceedings were conducted in Spanish despite the presence of women from English and indigenous language backgrounds. Later that evening in my field notes, I pondered over the silence around these issues, particularly given the emphasis on the "multiethnicity" of the event. Given the attention paid to virtually every conceivable topic of interest at the foro, it seemed unlikely that the omission of such a discussion was merely an oversight. Where, I wondered, might the space be made available to discuss Afro-Nicaraguan women's experiences of both racial and gender oppression if not in a space designed to engage the concerns of a multiethnic female audience?

Following the end of the second day of *foro* activities, several women authors were invited to close the proceeding with presentations of their work to the *foro* participants. Socorro Woods, a well-known Creole feminist researcher and educator was one of the authors asked to speak and began her presentation by apologizing *en español* that she would be giving her presentation in English rather than Spanish in order to be true to the subject matter of her book, *"I've Never Told this to Anybody": Creole Women's Experience of Racial and Sexual Discrimination and Their Need for Self-Recovery*. "Some may wonder," she began, "why [I wrote] a book on Creole women, and not just women as such." Outlining the aims of her research, she pointed to the fact that Black women experience multiple forms of discrimination in their lives and therefore, it was necessary to research and understand the ways in which such discrimination happens and its particular effects on Black women. Although she acknowledged that all women grapple with cultural, political, economic, and institutional gender subordination, it is critical to recognize the ways in which race, class, and geography inflect the forms of this gender subordination.

For the next 20 minutes, Woods explored questions of internal and external discrimination against Creole women within Creole communities and from the dominant Mestizo culture. Internal discrimination occurred in the forms of domestic violence against and patriarchal domination of Creole women, particularly those who are wives and mothers. Woods also pointed

to the ways in which normative standards of beauty such as the greater value placed on having a light-complexion, *pelo liso*, and European facial features (thin nose, blue eyes, etc.) reflected larger racist ideologies of Black inferiority. She outlined how racism and sexism on the Coast functions in a "masked way," and suggested that this was possible because of the illusory perception of harmonious relationships between ethnic groups.

"For example, everybody say we don't have discrimination – a lot of people say so. Why? Because the big celebration of ethnicity masks, somehow, the tension between the ethnic groups.[1]"

Throughout her book she argued that there is no room in contemporary discourses of celebratory multiculturalism to recognize discrimination and exclusion. She notes "Even if we [Black women] want to say something people find a way to reject it by celebrating the 'unity in diversity,' even though there really are tensions that go undebated (66)." Woods' assessment of the hegemony of multiculturalism was borne out by the responses of various participants at the *foro*. During her presentation the silence in the meeting hall was palpable. Many of the participants appeared visibly uncomfortable with the subject matter and Woods' analysis. Mestiza, indigenous, and afro-descendant women alike seemed to chafe at the suggestion that Black women somehow suffered from a different type of racialized gender discrimination, or, that racism, as she described it, existed at all on the Coast. Several mestiza participants complained that her refusal to translate the presentation into Spanish excluded them and could be seen as racist. Another Creole woman stated that there was no discrimination against Black people on the Coast; rather it was Black people's own "low self-esteem that make us think that we discriminate against.[2]"

Still, despite Woods' insistence on inserting an explicit analysis of Black women's experiences of intersectional analysis into an environment hostile to such critiques, I was disturbed and puzzled by the responses to her work. How, in a region that is founded on the

[1] Woods, 2005b.
[2] Ibid.

principles of multiculturalism and political plurality, could this happen? Why wasn't a group of educated, fairly progressive women/feminist activists unable to critically engage an analysis of racism and ethnic exclusion on the Coast? I want to suggest that it is Only in understanding the function of multiculturalism as a state discourse can we understand the gaps between reformist state recognition of cultural diversity and Black women's lived experiences of exclusion.

***State Multiculturalism in Nicaragua***

The Atlantic Coast has long been recognized as the most culturally diverse region of Nicaragua. It is home to six ethnic groups: Mestizos; three indigenous groups, the Miskitu, the Sumu-Mayagna, and the Rama; and two Afro-descendant groups, the Creole and the Garífuna. Despite the fact that this cultural difference of the region is now legally recognized by the state, the Atlantic Coast continues to be economically, politically and socially marginalized by the nation. Historically, like many Latin American nations, there has been a struggle to reconcile the imagined national identity of Nicaragua as a mestizo, Spanish-speaking nation with the reality of its multicultural, multiracial, and multilingual populace.[3] The Autonomy Statute of the two autonomous regions (located on the Atlantic Coast) encapsulates this attempt to reconcile the mestizo ideal to the multicultural reality of Nicaragua; interestingly, it locates cultural difference as a unique strength of the nation:

> "The Autonomy process enriches the national culture, recognizes and strengthens ethnic identity; respects the specificities of the cultures of Atlantic Coast communities; recovers the histories of those communities…repudiates any type of discrimination.[4]"

Since the 1980s, the Nicaraguan state has espoused a rhetoric of ethnic diversity that elides the persistence of Mestizo hegemony and anti-black and indigenous racisms in spheres of political power and cultural practice (Gould, 1998). This state-sponsored multiculturalism is the most recent attempt to address the nation's cultural diversity and provide a means by which

[3] Gould, 1998.
[4] Gobierno de Nicaragua, 1987, 2, author's translation.

political claims for collective land rights and political recognition can be legitimated.[5] The need for these political reforms is a direct response to the historical relationship between the mestizo-dominated Pacific coast and the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua.[6]

Several Afro-Nicaraguan women activists have pointed out the contradictory relationship between state recognition of the multicultural character of the nation with its refusal to actively confront and address systematic racial inequality. Angelica Brown, a educator and bilingual education advocate, described the existence of an "ethnic ladder" which creates a hierarchy among racial/ethnic groups in the region. She stated:

> "A lot of people say that there is no discrimination on the Coast or in Nicaragua. I would say that that is not the case. There is racial discrimination even among the six ethnic groups that live on the Atlantic Coast. The Spanish-speaking population they feel much better than the Black community."

Woods, however, directly implicates the state in helping to perpetuate quotidian practices of racial inequality, by pointing to the ways in which it deliberately attempts to diminish the significance of race for coast communities.

> "This whole racism thing, they, I should say the politicians try to glorify ethnicity to hide race. So with an autonomous law they want to make us believe that yes! We are all equal, we are all the same, there are no differences amongst us. And that's why I say racism is masked on the coast, it's silencing and work in such a subtle way so you don't even realize it is there. And the main thing is that they [politicians] don't want you to realize it is there."

In other words, recognition of cultural difference does not necessarily translate into a commitment to eradicating racial inequality or disparities of access to economic and political

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[5] Ibid.

[6] Nicaragua's history is divided between the Atlantic and Pacific sides of the nation and the nation was colonized by multiple colonial/imperial powers, namely the Spanish and the British. Unlike most Latin American countries, Nicaragua was colonized by two colonial powers, the Spanish and the British. The Pacific mirrors the history of many Latin American countries and is marked by Spanish colonization and a legacy of *mestizaje*. As a result, the Pacific is Spanish-speaking, mestizo, and largely Roman Catholic. The history of the Atlantic Coast diverges completely from this legacy. The Atlantic Coast, formerly known as the Mosquitia, stretches from the northern boundary of Honduras to the southern boundary of Costa Rica. Africans first began arriving on its shores in the sixteenth century, some as the slave cargo of British slave traders. Many came as formerly enslaved Africans fleeing slavery from the Caribbean and other parts of Central America.[6] Still, others arrived in the first half of the 20th century, migrating to the region to work as laborer on rubber and banana plantations. Finally, in 1894, after years of attempting to integrate the Coast, the Nicaraguan state imposed the Reincorporation on the coast, making it a part of Nicaragua. See Gordon, 1998 for additional work on Afro-Nicaraguan communities.

resources. In Nicaragua's case although multiculturalism accompanied an effort to redress the historical marginalization of ethnic groups on the Atlantic Coast, state recognition of cultural difference has been largely rhetorical. There have been no sustained efforts by the central government to maintain funding for bilingual education, provide ethnic communities with resources to secure land demarcation and titling, or to address the systematic discrimination of Black and indigenous people by the growing Mestizo population on the coast. Although there has never been *de jure* segregation in Nicaragua and ethnic groups may live among one another without conflict, that in and of itself is not necessarily an indication that racism does not exist on the Coast.

***Afro-Nicaraguan feminist responses to the Multicultural Myth***

In 2004, I interviewed Barbara Grandison, a Creole sociologist and human rights activist/educator. A shy, easy-going, and often soft-spoken woman, she became quite passionate when discussing the problematic rhetoric of multiculturalism on the Atlantic coast. She expressed frustration with the pervasiveness of these discourses that downplayed the presence of racism on the coast. It was difficult to discuss racism or organize for justice on the basis of racial discrimination because in Nicaragua, racism and discrimination operate in a "sleeping way.[7]" She compared Afro-Nicaraguan communities' struggle for equality and inclusion to attempting to fight while having one's hands tied with an invisible rope. The struggle of Afro-Nicaraguan feminist intellectuals and activists lies in making visible the hidden forms of racism and gender subordination that marginalize their communities.

In her book, *"I've Never Told this to Anybody": Creole Women's Experience of Racial and Sexual Discrimination and Their Need for Self-Recovery* Woods, stated that her desire to write about the lives of Black women was rooted in a radical political vision of female solidarity.[8]

[7] Morris, 2004, 6.
[8] Woods, 2005, 32.

Her work demonstrates the potential for developing political relationships between diasporic Black women and other marginalized women across boundaries of language, nation, sexuality and citizenship. Our stories, though shaped differently by nation, language, and history, are too similar to ignore. However, particularity matters and the need to develop a language that speaks specifically to the realities of racial and gender injustice in the region is reflected in the ways that Afro-Nicaraguan feminists are transforming U.S.-centric Black feminist theories in their intellectual production and activist organizing. It is precisely this effort to generate organic political knowledge that articulates the lived experiences of Black women that inform the work and theorizing of Afro-Nicaraguan feminists. In her work, Woods describes the struggle that Creole women confront in their attempts to address both racial and gender inequality:

> "Being black means struggle, and being a black woman implies a double struggle. First, we are discriminated against for being black and then for being women. As black women we have to make a double effort to get something done in this society…Ethnic discrimination is one thing, but gender discrimination is even worse. Some people will listen to a Black man talk, but they just will not accept to listen to a Black woman talk.[9]"

This "double struggle" informs Afro-Nicaraguan feminists' current struggle to dispel both the myth of harmonious multiculturalism as well as reveal the contours of sexism in Nicaragua and within Afro-descendant communities on the Coast. In an attempt to shed light on Black women's experiences of race and gender subordination, Afro-Nicaraguan feminist intellectuals have drawn from the work of U.S. Black feminist thinkers such as Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Barbara Smith, and Patricia Hill Collins in order to develop their own language for theorizing their experiences of gender and racial inequality[10]. The concept of intersectionality, is particularly useful for thinking through the ways in which racism is gendered and sexism is raced as well as how differently racialized women live these intersecting oppressions. Whether discussing sexual violence during the Black Woman's Voice radio program, or conducting

[9] Woods, 2005, 63-64.
[10] Woods' work is a wonderful example of this continued cross-fertilization. Additionally there are a number of Creole and Garifuna women intellectuals/activists based in the local universities in the region who are doing this work in the form of research, direct activism and public policy advocacy. Refer to the Centro de Estudios e Información de la Mujer Multiétnica-URACCAN at http://ceimm.uraccan.edu.ni/pages/inicio.htm.

research on the presence of women in the regional government these women are specifically challenging racism in their feminist work. My observation of and participation in this work informs my argument that their efforts to challenge the myth of multiculturalism constitutes a critical feminist political engagement that recognizes the intersectional nature of oppression for differently racialized women. In other words, any feminist practice that does not take into account the impact of racial inequality on Afro-descendent communities on the Coast can never speak to the lives and experiences of these women.