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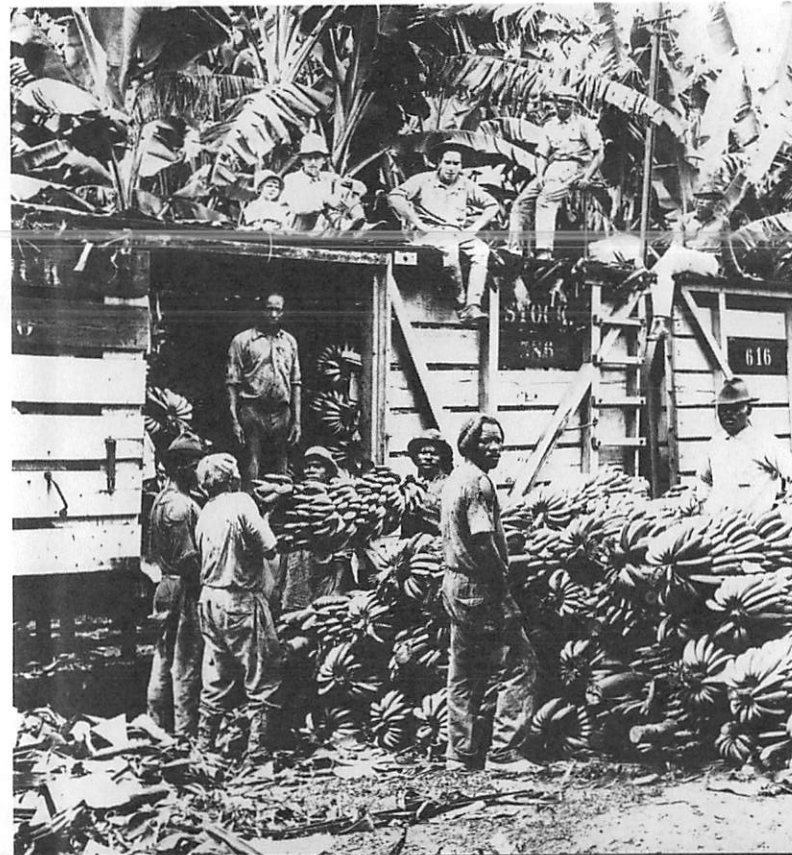
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Banana Plantation

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Contents

Preface	ix
Acknowledgments	xvii
1 / The Logistics of Production	3
2 / Monopoly Power	14
3 / Unequal Confrontation: The Appropriation of Bribri Territory, 1908–1931	24
4 / The Bribri and the Cash Economy: From Subsistence Agriculturalists to Small Farmers	34
5 / West Indian Immigration and the Origins of the Banana Industry	45
6 / Black Upward Mobility	66
7 / Ideological Framework of the Black Experience	85
8 / The Guaymí Become Banana Workers	111
9 / Guaymí Conjugated Oppression: Race and Class	120
10 / Political Implications of Guaymí Conjugated Oppression	145
11 / Kuna Banana Workers: “Tradition” and Monopoly Capital	160
12 / Hispanics in the Labor Force	179
13 / Hispanic Political Mobilization and Labor Control	194
	vii

14 / Conclusion: How Important Is Ethnicity?	213
Appendix: Maps and Figures	229
Notes	239
Bibliography	279
Index	303

Preface

Ethnicity imposed itself as the central theme of this book almost against my will. When I began my fieldwork on a United Fruit Company banana plantation spanning the borders of Costa Rica and Panama on the Atlantic Coast of Central America in mid-1982,¹ I had originally planned to collect data on the productive process and the noneconomic forms of coercion practiced by management on its labor force. Almost immediately, however, I was forced to recognize—at least on the phenomenological level—the salience of ethnicity on the plantation. Even as I exited the bus that brought me to the banana farms for the first time, I was accosted by a Kuna Amerindian woman in full traditional dress hawking lottery tickets. Suddenly an apelike howling filled the air. A group of Hispanic men and women who worked in the shanty shack stores by the side of the road were jeering at young Guaymí Amerindian men who were returning in an open flatbed transport cart from a day's work spreading potassium fertilizer. The cart stopped and the shanty shack hawkers swarmed around the Guaymí jeering and taunting them. Stony faced, the Amerindian workers approached the very same peddlers and bought soft drinks and candy. After the Guaymí left, the shanty keepers bragged and laughed with one another over how

much they had short-changed or overcharged the "*cholitos*."² Several other Guaymí browsing in the surrounding shops overheard them.

For the next sixteen months (July 1982 to January 1984) I found myself engulfed on the plantation and in its periphery by a whirlpool of distinct ethnic groups, each one constantly referring to one another's phenotypical and cultural characteristics in a deprecating manner. They included Bribri, Guaymí, and Kuna Amerindians, blacks of West Indian descent, white Anglo-Saxon Americans, and several different Hispanic peoples. What follows is an attempt to explicate these confrontations.

Although I focused my data collection on ethnicity, my initial research interest, the politics of labor control, continued to provide the framework for my analysis. My research experience has forced me to reassess theories of ethnicity and to grapple with their relationship to class. I am interested in ethnicity insofar as it is an ideological phenomenon: a set of symbolic markers that have been created—or have escalated—into a means of structuring power relations. Based on my experience on the plantation, however, I would go even further and argue that the most useful way to understand ethnicity is in the context of unequal power relations in the production process both within and across classes. I suspect that the reverse is also largely true: most analyses of the labor process, or of social inequalities in general, are incomplete without a careful examination of how ethnicity—or an ideological dimension comparable to ethnicity, such as gender—structures conflict and power.³

The United Fruit Company's Bocas del Toro plantation (hereafter referred to as the Bocas Division or the Bocas del Toro Division)⁴ offers privileged insight into processes of ethnic discrimination and economic exploitation because its complex division of labor has meshed over the past century with successive waves of immigrant laborers. The remarkable ethnic diversity of plantation society is hierarchically structured by a complicated productive process subdivided into dozens of job categories involving different degrees of technological skill, as well as physical and mental stress. The region's dual hierarchies—occupational and ethnic—feed upon and mutually define each other. The almost six thousand day laborers and seven hundred management employees on the plantation segment into what one could call a de facto apartheid occupational hierarchy. The local population have "essentialized" the "objective" characteristics of the various cohorts of workers in a racial idiom. For example, I frequently heard non-Amerindians insisting that the Guaymí spread corrosive fertilizers and dangerous pesticides because "their skin is thicker and they don't get sick." They were not paid the

full wage for strenuous fieldwork because, according to a foreman, "the Indian has low physiological needs. Because of his physical constitution, he can bear to do tasks that the Hispanic just can't perform. The Indian only thinks of food; he has no other aspirations. He works to eat."* Blacks, on the other hand, predominated in the Maintenance Department's repair shops and electrical division because, as I was repeatedly assured, they were "crafty and don't like to sweat." Recently arrived Nicaraguan Hispanic immigrants were said to work almost as hard as the Guaymí because they "are tough, have leathery skin [*cueron*] and aren't afraid of sweating under the hot sun." Finally, white North Americans were the top managers because "they are the smartest race on earth."

For the past century the plantation region has been a sort of pressure cooker producing charged belief systems (ideologies) around ethnicity. All the necessary structural ingredients and catalysts are present: conflictive management labor relations, a hierarchical system of production, a boom and bust economy, waves of immigration, and remarkable ethnic diversity.

In order to delimit more clearly my central theoretical concern—to transcend the ideology versus material reality debate—I have introduced a logistical tension to the narrative by organizing the chapters around specific ethnic groups rather than by proceeding with a chronological account of labor immigration and the process of immigration and banana production over the past century in Bocas del Toro. Each ethnic group in the plantation social formation, consequently, is accorded one or more chapters except for the various Hispanic groups, who are somewhat arbitrarily lumped together into two chapters. I begin the discussion of each ethnic group with an analysis of the group's initial incorporation into the plantation labor force and its location in the local occupational hierarchy. I then analyze the group's resistance to exploitation, as well as management's strategies for augmenting labor control. The second half of each discussion focuses on ideology: ethnic discrimination, and patterns of political and organizational mobilization.

The most pervasive methodological problem I faced in my field research is the extreme subjectivity of ethnicity as an object of study. As there are no defined indices for measuring or even for describing ethnicity, one by necessity relies on impressionistic observations. In cer-

*The author translated from the Spanish original all the quotes from conversations in the field with the exception of the interviews with elderly blacks of West Indian descent who spoke English and the half-dozen highest management-level employees who were North American.

tain instances, however, I was able to systematize my data numerically through access to the transnational's computerized labor rosters. For example, in figures 2 through 5 I "quantify" the pervasiveness of the de facto apartheid relations of production on the plantation by comparing region of origin (a good indicator of ethnicity) to job category.⁵

Other aspects of ethnicity, however, are not "quantifiable" or even "provable," such as racism, a term I use interchangeably with ethnic discrimination. Most analyses of the labor process and class struggle avoid serious discussions of the dynamic of racial discrimination per se. The reverse is also true: many discussions of racism fail to treat class in a systematic manner. Nevertheless, the dynamic of racism is probably one of the most important and politicized aspects of ethnicity.

I have chosen to single out for systematic attention an even more problematic and inadequately understood dimension of racism—its internalization. It is especially difficult for fieldworkers who are members of the dominant ethnic group in the societies they are examining to grapple with this subjective and sensitive issue. Indeed, as has been noted by Chicano anthropologists in the United States, Anglo Anthropologists often fail to note that informants react to researchers "within a field of interethnic conflict" (Rosaldo 1983: 64). What appears to be internalized racism, therefore, may be a "cultural performance" in the context of unequal power relations (Paredes 1978: 20–21). My research was complicated by my interest in the most sensitive aspects of ethnic discrimination, such as identifying its relationship to patterns of political mobilization and organization. In my fieldwork, therefore, I constantly had to be conscious of how my very presence distorted the ethnic and political discourse I was most interested in observing. Furthermore, when relationships of trust were finally established, I had to take great care since many of my informants risked losing their jobs if our conversations were overheard. Nevertheless, I was determined to address sensitive, controversial issues in detail since a central part of my argument is that ideology and political mobilization are what render ethnicity significant and, to a large extent, define ethnicity.

Significantly, the tension in my relationship to each ethnic group on the plantation tended to reflect the nature of that people's position in the local occupational hierarchy. I had the greatest difficulty in establishing trustful relationships, or even in initiating superficial conversations for that matter, with Guaymí workers. The two close friendships I eventually developed with Guaymí were with culturally marginalized or exceptional individuals. One was a Communist party member and union leader, the other a highly acculturated union organizer. In contrast, conversations and acquaintanceships with Kuna workers and

their families were relatively easy to establish. Indeed, "amiability" with white North Americans is one of the hallmarks the Kuna rely upon to retain their relatively privileged position in the labor force. Once again in the case of the Kuna, however, I was able to establish close relationships only with exceptional, if not marginal, individuals: a political leader and a former U.S. resident ostracized by the rest of the Amerindian community.

My interaction with the different Hispanic groups was more varied and contradictory. I spent most of my time with Hispanic workers and developed my deepest friendships among them, including my future spouse. In the early phase of my research, animated conversations over beer and rotgut alcohol proved to be the most effective means for breaking barriers. Subsequently, merely the daily routine of sharing close living quarters and eating space enabled me to establish trusted relationships, since it was taboo for a North American to treat day laborers, irrespective of their ethnicity, with respect. Despite the many close friendships I developed among Hispanic workers, some continued to suspect throughout my fieldwork that I was a company spy and others remained convinced that I was a Communist infiltrator.

The black population of West Indian descent was particularly receptive to my friendship and conversation. Indeed, as will be shown, privileged access to white North Americans through language and Anglo-Saxon colonial culture has been crucial to black upward mobility on the plantation. Friendships blossomed when I demonstrated genuine interest and respect; nevertheless, most of my relationships with the older generation remained distinctly colonialist, if not racist. Many elderly blacks made pointed reference to the "superiority" of North American culture and were extremely formal and polite.

My class/ethnic background was most useful in gaining the trust of top-level management, most of whom were either North American whites or Hispanics educated in the United States and fully acculturated. Within their ethnocentric, class perspective they could not conceive that a "fellow" university-educated, white North American could be anything but racist and promanagement. Given this privileged access I purposefully spent long hours socializing in the luxurious quarters of the club reserved for management, and on its nine-hole golf course. I was allowed to consult most of the transnational's files, including almost a century's worth of documents. The "archives," extensively cited in the pages to come, consisted of thousands of pages of letters and memoranda stuffed into several dozen unnumbered mildewed and worm-eaten cardboard boxes, haphazardly stored in an empty warehouse pending destruction. Although incomplete and ravaged by decay

in a tropical environment, the documents provided a unique historical vision of management's strategies, including its most confidential internal reports.* Tragically the bulk of their historical archives, stored at the transnational's headquarters in the United States, have long since been destroyed.

In requesting permission from company officials to undertake fieldwork on their plantation in Costa Rica and Panama, I was conscientiously precise about my research interests, which they judged to be appropriately "anthropological" and nonthreatening: "A history of the different ethnic groups that have worked for the company since its founding." Nevertheless, although fully aware that I was an anthropologist writing a book on the plantation region, many of the top-level management cadre persisted unhesitatingly in engaging in crude racist discourse when socializing with me. They were so wrapped up in their white supremacist plantation universe that often they probably did not realize the implications of what they were saying. This naively ethnocentric world view extended, with exceptions, to the very highest levels of the transnational. For example, at United Brands' international headquarters in New York City (since relocated to Cincinnati) I was graciously granted personal life history interviews and was also allowed limited access to internal files and photographs.

Methodological difficulties aside, the real tension in my research lies at a higher level of theoretical abstraction. Political economy analyses of ethnicity, even when they are rooted in dynamic models of historical process and confrontation, are almost always plagued by the Damocles sword of economic determinism. They relegate the class/ethnicity matrix to being a special case of the base/superstructure relationship, whereby ethnicity (an idea in the superstructure) reflects—even if in an allegedly dialectical manner—the economic or class-rooted reality of the base. The importance accorded to ethnicity is thereby embroiled in the unresolvable debate over the relative importance of ideas versus material forces in shaping historical processes. Despite my insistence on history and struggle, I have frequently found myself torn between a so-called vulgar materialism on the one hand (i.e., explaining away ethnicity as a reflection of economic dictates) and mystified idealism on the other hand (i.e., converting ethnicity into a driving force in the historical development of the plantation social formation). At times I have felt

*The company files and correspondence prior to the 1960s were in English unless they involved exchanges with Central American government officials or local legal suits. The company files from the contemporary period were for the most part in Spanish and were translated into English by the author.

that the ideology/material reality dialectic is a function of the analytical distance of the social scientist. The closer one is to the empirical, day-to-day reality, the more important ethnicity (and ideology in general) appear to be. When thinking back on long-term historical processes, however, one tends to assign less of an "autonomous role" to ideas than when one is engaged in the nitty-gritty of determining how a given ethnic group is participating in a specific union-organizing drive or a political election.

The material reality/ideology dialectic has become a sterile, evasive compromise for conceptualizing the relationship between class and ethnicity. Part of the problem lies in the definition of the concepts of class and ideology vis-à-vis material reality. Class should not be separated from ethnicity or ideology from material reality. The base/superstructure dichotomy is even less applicable if our definition of class is not solely a material one; that is, not merely a relationship to the means of production and the social division of labor, but also an ideological and political process. Class consciousness is a crucial dimension of class and is part of its definition (cf. Rude 1980; Smith 1984; Thompson 1963). Conversely ethnicity—and other ideological expressions—can be understood "materially" (cf. Smith 1986).

Another complication in the definition of class, especially on the banana plantation, is the plethora of class fractions with distinct material interests and ideological orientations. The notion of a straightforward confrontation between a working class and a management class is not particularly useful because of a complicated internal hierarchy within the numerous categories of managers, skilled workers, and laborers on the plantation. Privilege and prestige differentiate the day laborers among themselves. Similarly, there are different levels of skilled workers as well as several levels of managers. These numerous categories of internally differentiated workers and managers, consequently, have developed distinct perceptions of their class interests. They frequently espouse ideologies (of which racism is one of the most salient) to defend their positions of relative privilege.

The notion of a dialectical relationship, therefore, helps us only semantically in our attempt to understand how ethnicity and class interact in mobilizing ethnic groups within any given social formation. The discussion must move on to a new arena. No satisfactory paradigm yet exists, but there are promising paths for exploration.



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ETHNICITY AT WORK

1

2

3

ONE / The Logistics of Production

[A Banana plantation] . . . is a poor place to live unless you're a banana.

—Consultant's report to the United Fruit Company by Laidlow & Co., 1964

On Tuesday, the 28th of the current month, the one-and-one-half-year-old daughter of a worker in Farm 96 died in the afternoon from suffocation caused by parasites.

—Labor Relations Report, Sixaola District, week of June 25–July 1, 1983

Banana plantations offer monotonous, isolated landscapes. The Bocas del Toro and Talamanca valleys, where I performed my fieldwork, were formerly vast expanses of poorly drained insect- and snake-ridden tropical rain forest spanning a contested border between Costa Rica and Panama (see map 1). Beginning in the 1890s, this region was converted into one of the most productive banana farms in Latin America. The plantation is owned and operated by the Chiriqui Land Company, a subsidiary of the United Fruit Company (merged into United Brands in 1971 and renamed Chiquita Brands in 1987), one of the world's oldest and most powerful United States–based transnational corporations.¹

Seen from the air, the green canopy of the Bocas del Toro plantation is broken at regular intervals by a network of dirt roads, railroad switchbacks, drainage ditches, and the shiny zinc roofs of packing plants and workers' barracks. On the ground the hot sun combines with almost daily rains (two meters of rainfall every year) to create, day and night, a saunalike atmosphere (temperatures range between 23 and 34 degrees centigrade), ideal for banana growth. Pervasive is the sweet-and-sour stench of decaying banana stems and pesticide fallout. More bothersome but less frequent are the burning clouds of Chlorotlalonil and Dithane spray, dropped from small airplanes over the entire planta-

nion on a biweekly basis to control the spread of the leaf fungus "black sigatoka."

Precious little of the fertile loam soil is wasted. The banana plants begin right where the housing compounds and packing plants end. In 1987, some 6,800 hectares of bananas produced over 20 million 40-pound boxes of fruit for export overseas.² Just under 16 percent of this production (1,067 hectares) was grown on the Costa Rican side of the border and the rest in Panama (see map 2). Nationalist pressures from the governments of Panama and Costa Rica obliged the company in the 1970s to allow five private producers and two state companies (COBANA on the Panama side of the border, and PAIS in Costa Rica) to cultivate 22 percent of these hectares.³ Nevertheless, all bananas grown by these "independent" producers were sold on long-term guaranteed contracts to the Chiriqui Land Company, which exports under the parent company's trademark "Chiquita" to Western Europe and the United States.

The housing provided by the transnational reflects the rigid occupational hierarchy. House size and shape (and even furniture) conform strictly to an employee's job category (cf. Camacho 1982). Overseers, timekeepers, and foremen live apart from the day laborers' barracks in more spacious one- and two-family houses. In the center of the plantation, surrounded by tall fences and manicured hedges and lawns, is the luxurious housing complex reserved for the top echelons of management, called the White Zone. It includes an exclusive sporting complex known as the club, with a nine-hole golf course, a swimming pool, a bowling alley, a tennis court, and an air-conditioned bar and movie hall.

For the vast majority of the plantation population access to the club and the White Zone is strictly forbidden. The luxury of the White Zone contrasts violently with the squalor of the overcrowded barracks' area, where the unpaved roads and walkways are either covered with ankle-deep mud or engulfed by clouds of dust.

I lived on the Costa Rican side of the border, known as the Sixaola District, in a barrack room only 2.3 by 3.3 meters, and yet I shared it, initially, with three other workers. In the room next door, a couple with three children, one an infant, lived under the same cramped conditions. The crowding was even more severe in the larger barracks, in which kitchens were provided. In one case I counted thirty people sharing a total floor space of 40 meters. According to the Ministry of Health inspector the barracks averaged four persons per "bedroom."

Most housing was originally built to accommodate single men—hence the local name *baché*, a Spanish colloquialism for bachelor's quarters, but owing to the overcrowding, families with newborn infants

were obliged to live side by side with unaccompanied adolescent migrant workers. In my barracks, only three toilets and two showers were available for more than thirty people, including three newborn infants, three young children, and two "retired" grandparents. The majority of the residents were young single male immigrants, several of whom were alcoholics. Occasionally we would wake on Sunday mornings to find the rest rooms covered with vomit. There was also a serious vermin problem.

The infrastructure for social diversion was limited to bars, brothels, and a half dozen soccer fields.⁴ On the Costa Rican side of the border, where I spent most of my time, the stores and restaurants consisted of shanty shack stalls stretching single file along the muddy road paralleling the railroad that leads to the Panama border crossing at the Sixaola Bridge. Behind the shacks, sunken in a mud field, were the zinc-roofed cement structures of two brothels and a dance hall. This shanty town had emerged almost overnight in 1978, when the company reopened its abandoned farms on the Costa Rican side of the border. Consequently, there was no provision for sewage or garbage disposal.

Not surprisingly, alcoholism, venereal disease, petty crimes, and random violence abounded in this setting. On paydays I could hear the high-pitched howling of intoxicated workers fighting with one another or merely releasing pent-up frustrations. The paucity of healthy diversion was exacerbated by the geographical isolation of the region. There was no road to the interior of Panama, and the one road that reached the plantation on the Costa Rican side was not completed until 1978. It had not yet been paved at the time of my fieldwork and was impassable on several occasions when heavy rains washed away the bridges. There was only one telephone on the Costa Rican side of the border, and it was frequently out of order. There was no post office and only shortwave radio stations could be picked up.

The administration of the plantation, or the "division" as the entire plantation complex was referred to by management, was highly structured. The secondary unit was the district, which was managed by a superintendent. Districts were further subdivided into farms (between four and ten per district) of approximately 150 hectares each, all connected by a railroad network. Each packing farm hosted a plant, where stems of bananas were cut into clusters. The clusters were then washed, selected for quality, sprayed with pesticides, and packed into 40-pound boxes.⁵ At the end of the day the boxes were loaded onto a railroad car for transport to the Panamanian port of Almirante, where they were once again loaded by hand onto freighters for their voyage across the Atlantic.

The daily supervision of the packing plants was performed by an

overseer (*mandador*), who was assisted by a timekeeper and two foremen. Between thirty and sixty laborers worked in an average-sized packing plant. The crucial tasks requiring most skill and training were those of quality selection and packing. Most of the selectors were women; they divided the large clusters of bananas into smaller bunches, discarding in the process all bananas that did not meet export quality standards. Packers were usually men who placed the washed and selected bunches into cardboard boxes.

An additional forty to eighty workers (always men) were employed in the fields as harvesters and cultivators.⁶ There were dozens of distinct specialized tasks within cultivation, such as pesticide dispensing, pruning, securing guy lines, and wrapping plastic bags around immature banana stems.⁷ Harvesting, however, was by far the most strenuous of all the tasks in banana production. Harvesters had to carry 80- to 100-pound stems of bananas on their shoulders up to 50 yards and hang them from an overhead wire upon which the stems of bananas were then slid to the packing plant (sometimes over a mile away). Heavily laden harvesters had to jump across drainage ditches, duck guy lines, and maintain their balance—often in mud up to their calves—for eight to ten hours a day. A foreman or an assistant foreman supervised each of these tasks in the fields.

Banana production is seasonless; it requires constant maintenance and harvesting. The result is a rigid schedule of daily employment. Laborers must be willing to work eight to twelve or thirteen hours a day, six and sometimes even seven days a week. In fact, during my fieldwork workers regularly went to the fields for a couple of hours on Sundays in order to catch up on overdue harvesting, pruning, fertilizing, or fungus control cycles. Given this grueling schedule of daily employment a stable, fully proletarianized, and well-disciplined labor force is indispensable to the company.

Banana production has not always been the physically stable and intensive production process described above. Prior to the introduction of disease-resistant varieties in the 1960s, bananas were cultivated for export in an almost semimigratory fashion owing to the rapidity with which bananas deplete prime quality soils and to their susceptibility to disease.⁸ From the turn of the century through the late 1960s, banana companies were forced repeatedly to abandon infected, exhausted lands and to clear new plantations out of fertile, disease-free, virgin jungle. A retired United Fruit Company engineer who was in charge of opening new districts to banana production from the 1940s through the 1970s described to me these semimigratory cultivation techniques:

The Panama disease used to kill everything. The only solution was to get a hold of new lands. It was not possible to maintain bananas once the disease struck. So when one farm died off another was planted, one would die another was planted, one would die another was planted, and once the division was played out you had to leave the country and find another. That's how we ended up in Ecuador, and in Colombia, in all those places, Guatemala, Dominican Republic. So from Limón we went to a division in Honduras that also got killed off; then in '28 we came to Armuelles, and in '38 the division in Honduras, which had died off, served as a basis for Golfito, and they brought over the buildings, the hospital, etc., all that from Honduras. Even the personnel were imported from Honduras to develop Golfito.

These shifting cultivation practices strained labor relations because the clearing of virgin territory invariably involved poor working and living conditions for the pioneer laborers.

The Bocas Division developed from a chaotic pattern of shifting cultivation. Large areas of jungle were cleared, cultivated, abandoned, and then subsequently reopened to production. During the ninety years the United Fruit Company has operated in the region, at one time or another, bananas have been grown for export over a 200- to 300-square-mile region, ranging from the Cricamola River Delta, at the southernmost extreme of the division in Panama, to the upper Talamanca Valley, at the plantation's northernmost boundary in Costa Rica (see map 2). In the 1890s, for example, the bulk of production came from the Cricamola Delta, Bastimentos Island, Chiriquí Grande, and the lands around Almirante (see map 2). The remnants of bridges, railroads, and even tunnels can still be seen decaying in the jungle in such remote Amerindian territories as the mouth of the Cricamola River or the upper reaches of the Talamanca Valley. With the spread of Panama disease, in the early 1900s and 1910s, banana production extended steadily northward along the Changuinola and Sixaola rivers, crossing into Costa Rica in 1908 and reaching the Talamanca Valley in the 1920s. Already by 1910, 15,000 acres of bananas had been abandoned in the Bocas Division (LaBarge 1959: 39). By the late 1920s, production had been drastically curtailed in Talamanca and along the Sixaola River on the Costa Rican side of the border (see map 2). For example, cultivations were reduced from 29,600 acres in 1912 to 4,200 in 1928 (BDA: Calder to Taylor, May 15, 1929). By 1926, the company had ceased banana production on a total of 49,500 acres (LaBarge 1959: 39). In fact, from 1941 through 1949, no bananas were exported out of Bocas. The more fertile portions of the infected banana lands, for example, the entire Sixaola District on the Costa Rican side of the border, were planted in cacao, and by

1929, the Bocas Division was exporting over 6.3 million pounds of dry cacao a year (LaBarge 1959: 39). From 1932 through 1941 an average of just over 9 million pounds a year of dry cacao were produced on some 24,000 acres (BDA: Hamer to Pollan, Feb. 1, 1943). According to press reports in the mid-1930s the Bocas Division was the largest cacao plantation in the world (*Voz del Atlántico*, Nov. 10, 1934: 4). The company began abandoning cacao as well in the 1950s, and by 1967 it no longer maintained operations (neither bananas nor cacao) in the Sixaola District on the Costa Rican side of the border. It was not until 1977/78 that the Sixaola District (which in the interim had reverted to jungle) was once again opened to banana production, but this time with a disease-resistant variety (see chapter 9).

Each time the company ceased production on infected or exhausted soils, it systematically destroyed the infrastructure it had constructed (railroads, bridges, telephone lines, etc.) in order to prevent competitors from being able to renew production on a smaller scale.⁹ A North American historian from the 1930s reported destruction in the Talamanca District: "Talamanca, Costa Rica, near the Panamanian border, has so fallen from its former economic position that its residents have complained of the removal by the fruit Company of the latter's telephones, rails and bridges, so that not even a roadbed remained by which they could occasionally hike out of the 'highland of weeds' into the neighbouring municipality" (Kepner 1936: 62, 90). Today all that remains in Talamanca of the United Fruit Company's operations are a few decaying wooden buildings, odd pieces of twisted half-buried railroad track, and a 50-yard-long tunnel through a cliff side.

The introduction of the disease-resistant varieties of bananas "Gran Nain" and "Valerie" stabilized banana production and increased its capitalization. Nevertheless the logistics of banana production continue to defy labor-substituting mechanization. In fact, the disease-resistant varieties, due to their susceptibility to bruising, have augmented the demand for labor. The company has been obliged to construct packing plants on the plantation itself in order to pack the fragile fruit into cardboard boxes before it is transported. The new varieties also demand more intensive cultivation maintenance (fertilizer, pesticides, pruning, etc.) increasing the need for skilled workers. Consequently, the transnational must maintain a stable labor force, thereby qualitatively altering the nature of management-labor relations.

Because of the greater susceptibility to bruising of the new varieties used in export production workers require constant supervision. If the bananas are not delicately handled during harvesting, packing, and transport they will arrive in European and North American ports with

blemishes. Market values for bananas in export markets are largely determined by physical appearance.¹⁰ Because a bruise or scar shows up only several hours after a banana has been mistreated, foremen and overseers scrutinize the workers under their supervision in order to prevent them from damaging the bananas.

Needless to say, management-labor relations are explosive in this setting. Tension between laborers and their supervisors is exacerbated because most tasks are paid on a piecework basis (i.e., by how much is produced). Laborers strive to work fast in order to earn more, whereas their foremen attempt to slow them down to ensure that the fruit is not handled roughly.¹¹ The plantation is literally a "factory in the field," especially since the introduction of packing plants. Large numbers of laborers are concentrated in a small working space.¹² Consequently, banana workers throughout Latin America have been exceptionally combative.¹³ Historically, they have been at the forefront of the labor union movement in Central America.

Because the human factor is so crucial in banana production, the transnational has developed elaborate techniques for labor supervision and control. Millions of dollars each year are spent on labor relations. According to economist Frank Ellis (1983:363), it was organizational, rather than technological, innovations that spurred the dramatic increases in yields during the 1970s:

The sustained increase in physical production of the workers can be attributed, above all, to the intensification of their time spent in the productive process. This has been due to the systematic application of the advances made in the administrative sciences to the work process. This explains how it has been possible for the productivity of the labor force to increase at the same time that the proportion between capital investment and labor has declined during the second half of the period studied [1970s]. (Ellis 1983:363)

The establishment of packing plants on the farms and the intensification of cultivation techniques have facilitated the growth of a labor movement as workers have become increasingly stable during the post-World War II period. Despite initial opposition to any form of labor union in the early years, the company changed tactics in the 1950s, concentrating on co-opting labor unions and their leadership rather than on obstructing their formation.¹⁴ The company has adopted a policy of deliberately promoting parallel, promanagement unions, which are affiliated internationally with the ORIT (Inter-American Regional Labor Organization) and the ICFTU (International Confederation of Free Trade Unions). This "free and democratic" labor movement receives funding, technical advice and training from AIFLD (American Insti-

tute for Free Labor Development).¹³ During my fieldwork it was public knowledge that the ICFTU-affiliated union leaders (known locally as the "whites") were supported by management. The president of the United Fruit Company in New York City told me that the union in the Bocas del Toro Division was "very, very cooperative." Similarly, the division manager in Bocas del Toro told me that the local ORIT leadership was "very responsible."

Since the 1960s, the ORIT/ICFTU-affiliated leaders have competed for hegemony over the labor movement on the plantation with a more militant, antimanagement tendency (known locally as the "reds"), which is affiliated internationally with the WCTU (World Federation of Trade Unions). On the Panamanian side of the border entirely new slates of union leaders representing opposing tendencies are elected as units in biannual elections. The winning slate can then change the international affiliation of the union during its period of incumbency.¹⁴ On the Costa Rican side of the border there exists a similar dichotomy between a management-sponsored group (ORIT-affiliated) and a militant group (WCTU-affiliated). The only difference is that individuals rather than slates of leaders are selected at the biannual union elections; consequently, the international affiliation and political tendency of the union do not change after each election as they often do in Panama. During my fieldwork, ORIT-affiliated leaders were in control of the union in Costa Rica, and most workers dismissed them as corrupt tools of management. The apathy of the Costa Rican workers toward their union was so pronounced that company officials became concerned lest "communists" take advantage of the disenchantment to create an alternative movement. For example, the Labor Relations Department for the Sixaola District reported to the Bocas division manager: "It is dangerous not to promote the union . . . because we run the risk of having another union being formed of a different tendency which would oblige us to negotiate under less favorable conditions than the ones we have arranged now" (SDF: Weekly Labor Relations Report, June 16, 1981).

Company officials regularly staged events in order to make the ORIT union appear combative to the rest of the labor force: "[We] met with the union and announced to the leaders our intention of raising wages. They agreed with our plan and were very satisfied with the proposition that was made to them. They are scheduled to communicate to the workers that the union has requested a meeting with the company to demand a wage hike. In this manner they will give the impression that the wage increase was a conquest of the union" (SDF: Weekly Labor Relations Report, April 17, 1982).

In the early 1980s the company began promoting "solidarity associations" to defuse the banana workers' union movement in Costa Rica. These associations are organized logistically as savings and loans credit unions but their self-avowed purpose is to "promote harmony between labor and management." They are specifically procapital and anti-union, and insist that even the ORIT-affiliated unions are communist fronts. They claim that management-labor relations must be based on mutual help and ethics rather than class struggle. Sociologists have compared these associations (unique to Costa Rica) to the labor movement promoted by Mussolini in the 1930s and 1940s (cf. Blanco and Navarro 1982). A solidarity association existed on the farms owned by PAIS, the government company in the Sixaola District. Although membership was supposed to be voluntary, workers were obliged to affiliate when they signed their employment contracts.

Co-option into solidarity associations or management-controlled unions has not been sufficient to control the labor force. Management has also relied on an extensive and sophisticated network of repression, and indeed there has been a long history of systematic violence and brutality against striking workers on United Fruit Company plantations.¹⁷ In the 1920s and 1930s company officials had already established a systematic network of surveillance against "labor agitators." Headquarters regularly circulated warnings to the managers of its subsidiaries:

TROPICAL DIVISION MANAGERS:

From time to time evidence comes to our attention of the desire of communistic elements to foster trouble among the laborers of the Tropical Divisions. . . . Two typical communistic agitators named Fitzsimmons and Hardy are already in Central America for the purpose of spreading "red" doctrines and generally encouraging unrest. . . . Pass the gist of this information unofficially, to the proper authorities of your country. Should these agitators show up in your Division I will appreciate your advising me. (BDA: Circular no. 32-16, Sept. 7, 1932)

Following a major strike in the company's Colombia Division in 1928, the company sent the photographs of the strike leaders to all division managers with a brief psychological sketch of each individual (BDA: Memorandum, March 8, 1929). In the 1940s, headquarters ordered division managers to establish formal political blacklists:

There are several professional labor agitators who are circulating around the country stirring up trouble. I want each division to circularize the other three with the names of known troublemakers that may have been discharged, so that the other divisions can protect themselves against employ-

ing these undesirable elements. I leave it to each of you to work out a system whereby, when new laborers are being employed, they be checked against the list of troublemakers that you may have so as to avoid employing them. (BDA: Hamer to Costa Rica and Panama division managers, Feb. 9, 1943)

In recent years surveillance has benefited from sophisticated technology. All the major banana companies operating in Costa Rica, for example, share a computerized blacklist which contained 4,195 names in 1982 (SDF: Labor Relations Department, "Blacklist," Feb. 25, 1982).¹⁸ Most companies supplement the computerized blacklist with personal letters to one another's Labor Relations departments, detailing the specific characteristics of "dangerous union organizers": "William ———, a very active leader and agitator from El Carmen Farm. Pablo ——— likes to steal. Pedro ———, a well-known communist. Vargas ——— was the founder of the union on this farm, very active, and with a lot of talent in this activity. Gómez ———, still working, is the most rigid and problematical of all the leaders; he only knows how to say no. He is an agitator and number-one enemy of the companies. Arias ———, still a leader, but is not problematic (SDF: "File for Exclusive Use of Employees of Confidence, 1982").

The individual in charge of union repression on the PAIS farms, in the Sixaola District described to me in detail how his "spy system" operated. He referred to it as the "ears in the ground program [*oidos en el suelo*]" and assured me that his network was so systematic that it even monitored apolitical laborers who complained excessively about working conditions, "You have to eliminate the ones who complain too much. They can be just as dangerous if you don't fire them right away."

Correspondence from the Labor Relations Department in Sixaola amply documents the extent of this repressive network.¹⁹ "With the system 'ears in the ground' that I have put into operation, I was able to detect the formation of a union within the banana farms. As a consequence of this we fired thirty-six workers, see adjoined list. . . . I am following up on this with a second round of firing to eliminate all the undesirables who have infiltrated the labor force" (SDF: Araya to Lohrengel, June 3, 1982). "A few groups continue to promote the formation of a communist union. This causes me a great deal of work as we have to be very careful. I have in my possession a list of twenty-five whose affiliation to the red union has been proven. Others are being investigated very discreetly" (SDF: Araya to Lohrengel, July 7, 1982).

Needless to say, the political atmosphere on the plantation, (especially on the Costa Rican half of the division) was tense. In fact, this tension represented one of the biggest obstacles in my fieldwork. For example, within forty-eight hours of my arrival on the plantation I was

reported to the Labor Relations Office by an informant in the "ears in the ground program." I had aroused his suspicion by asking questions about a strike that had occurred six months previously. Consequently I changed my interviewing style dramatically lest I be denounced as a communist or as critical of the company. Even friends do not reveal political orientations or discuss union activities with one another. Not only did this polarization complicate my ability to interpret worker discourse, but it also led me to fear that the worker I had finally established trust with would secretly report me to management and that I would be violently ejected from the plantation's premises.

As noted in the preface, however, my ethnicity was a crucial factor for overcoming suspicion and for obtaining privileged access to management. This level of trust and acceptance was more difficult to establish with the day laborers. Although tongues often loosened in the context of alcoholic debauch, most workers probably suspected that I was really a company spy commissioned to search out union organizers, or to gauge political discontent. Why else would a "*gringo*" be interested in befriending them? In the rare cases when a political trust was established great care had to be taken lest someone eavesdrop on our conversations.

TWO / Monopoly Power

The United Fruit Company has already succeeded on several occasions in ridding itself of competitor companies by flooding markets with bananas at a loss. It had just announced that it was laying off half of its labor force on its Costa Rican plantations and that it was going to reduce daily salaries . . . from one dollar to seventy-five cents. This reduction in production will severely affect the economic situation of Costa Rica. In this manner the United Fruit Company provides itself with bargaining power in its dealings with the government. . . . The plantations in other countries—and in this particular case the Bocas del Toro Division in Panama—will compensate for the production lost in Costa Rica. . . . Nor will the company have a labor shortage as the termination of the Panama Canal has left a large number of unemployed workers available.

—Report of the French consul in San José, April 28, 1912

United Fruit bought protection, pushed governments around, kicked out competition, and suppressed union organization.

—Thomas McCann, former head of Public Relations of the United Fruit Company

Traditional anthropological monographs often gloss over the implications of the larger historical, structural, political, and economic contexts within which the local communities operate and develop. It is impossible to understand the Bocas del Toro plantation and its surrounding region in a self-contained vacuum. Class and ethnicity on the plantation are an integral part of the United Fruit Company's (United Brands') world economy. Because of the multinational nature of the company, events occurring halfway across the globe can suddenly alter the minute details of production on any one of its subsidiaries. Furthermore, the depth and breadth of the formidable international monopoly power of the United Fruit Company as one of the "Fortune 500" transnational corporations must be fully appreciated to understand local confrontations between management and labor.

The United Fruit Company, legally incorporated in New Jersey on March 30, 1899, was a fusion of the three largest banana importers in operation at that time: the Boston Fruit Company, headed by Andrew Preston; the Jamaica-based holdings of Laurence Baker; and three plantations (in Costa Rica, Panama, and Colombia) owned by Minor C. Keith, a railroad financier active in Central and South America (LaBarge 1959: 16; Kepner 1936: 41–43).¹

Ever since its inception, the transnational has been known for its monopolistic practices, hence its Latin American nickname "the octopus [*el pulpo*]": "This powerful company has throttled competitors, dominated governments, manacled railroads, ruined planters, choked cooperatives, domineered over workers, fought organized labor, and exploited consumers" (Kepner and Soothill 1935: 336).

The founding of the Bocas del Toro Division at the turn of the century provides a good example of how swiftly the company was able to exert monopoly control over a region it had targeted for expansion. Before then dozens of banana companies (both foreign and national) competed in Bocas del Toro province. In the 1880s the province had the reputation of being a banana-producing region with the largest number of small, independent operators in the world. The producers delivered their fruit in canoes to purchasers anchored in the middle of Almirante Bay (see map 2). In 1904 the company bought out the largest producer, the Snyder Banana Company, and began offering local producers purchasing prices far above the market rate so as to drive the other businesses out of the region. Once the rival purchasing companies had been bankrupted, the company promptly lowered the purchasing prices for bananas to below production costs, thereby driving out the competitive growers. Within a few years the company had driven out or bankrupted its local competition and was able to exert exclusive control over the Bocas del Toro banana industry; hence the following formal complaint in 1907 to the president of Panama from a delegation of private producers:

The City of Bocas del Toro, once so prosperous, owing to the banana industry commenced some twenty years ago by native sons, aided by industrious foreigners such as Messrs. [list of seven names] is today found in a state of decadence for the reason that the industry has been monopolized, as well in its production as in its exportation, by the powerful company called the United Fruit Company, which some ten years or more since came and established itself in this place, resulting with its intelligence and with its money and the assistance received from the government in driving from the market the other companies which previously sent their vessels here for cargoes of fruit which they purchased at living prices, so these companies were obliged to completely abandon this port because the previously mentioned company reduced the price to a minimum and limited purchases, so that the greater part of the fruit was lost for lack of buyers. (BDA: "Petition to the President of Panama," 1907)

The United Fruit Company usually purchased exclusive rights to all the locally available prime banana lands in the regions where it operated. In Bocas del Toro, the transnational bought immense estates of virgin jungle for token sums through local intermediaries who obtained

the land from the government free of charge under the guise of land colonization and development schemes. The governments of Panama and Costa Rica allowed these wholesale transfers of land to the United Fruit Company to occur even though the original "colonizers" made no pretense of developing their newly acquired lands before selling them to the company (Quesada 1977).² In fact, both the staking of the original land claim and its transfer to the United Fruit Company were often performed in the very same session before the same judge. This combined transaction was the case, for example, with the 11,000 hectares comprising the Sixaola Valley (see map 2), purchased on March 1, 1900, via the company's attorney and friends. In this particular case the Costa Rican intermediary "colonized" government land for the United Fruit Company in the name of his wife and nine children, there being a 500-hectare limit per person (Protocol #7, cited in Palmer 1907: 185-86).³

By the mid-1930s the company had obtained over 3.6 million acres throughout Latin America and the Caribbean, most of which was never planted. As late as 1934, 88 percent of the land owned by the company was not cultivated (Kepner 1936: 86). Company officials claimed they needed these vast expanses because of the mobile nature of the banana industry due to disease and soil exhaustion. However, control of such immense expanses was a means of preventing rival firms from being able to enter the industry: "United Fruit expands its territorial domain not because it needs more land but in order to cripple its competitors" (Kepner 1936: 87).

Elderly company officials explained to me that the company actually benefited from the ecological susceptibility of bananas to disease and soil exhaustion. The devastation from disease of most banana farms within ten or fifteen years of their initiation raised the barriers to entry into the industry. Few companies could afford to build the initial infrastructure (railroads, ports, housing) necessary for opening a new division only to abandon it ten years later. Furthermore, since the United Fruit Company already owned most of the reserves of top-quality virgin lands in Latin America, no territory was available for rival firms to expand into. An epidemiologist in charge of disease control for the United Fruit Company told me that "the company dragged its feet" in the 1950s in the search for a new variety of banana plants resistant to Panama disease. Indeed, the United Fruit Company lost much of its monopoly power in the 1960s following the physical stabilization of the banana industry due to the introduction of fertilizer and disease-resistant varieties. Today, vast expanses of virgin land are no longer necessary for the long-term success of a banana company. The same soil can be cultivated year after year with no appreciable decline in productivity. The

company's ownership of millions of acres of uncultivated jungle throughout Central and South America has, therefore, become unnecessary.⁴

Although the United Fruit Company is no longer the sole giant in the banana industry, it continues to wield disproportionate power over the economic and political affairs of the nations within which it operates.⁵ Historically, the company has shown a distinct preference for military dictatorships.⁶ It has repeatedly bolstered or destabilized host country governments depending upon their willingness to provide tax breaks and land concessions and to repress labor unions; hence the derogatory nickname of "banana republic" for the corrupt, dictatorial regimes that have predominated in Central America.⁷ For example, in 1954 the company contributed decisively to the overthrow of the democratically elected government of President Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala (see Schlesinger and Kinzer 1983; McCann 1976:44-62). Significantly, at the same time that the company was pressuring the State Department to overthrow the Arbenz government by a military coup it had already begun expanding operations in Panama and Costa Rica in anticipation of a possible withdrawal from Guatemala should its covert plans backfire (LaBarge 1959:268).⁸

The company also regularly engaged in bribing public officials. Samuel Zemurray, a United Fruit Company president in the 1930s, allegedly remarked: "In Honduras, a mule costs more than a deputy" (Volk 1981: 5). In 1974 Ely Black, the company's president (who subsequently committed suicide), paid the president of Honduras (General Oswaldo López Arellano) \$1.25 million to lower the banana export tax (McCann 1976:217, 233; Tracy 1976:146; Volk 1981:21).⁹

In most cases the transnational does not have to pay for the favors provided by host country governments. Because the banana companies are usually the biggest employers, as well as the most consistent and important sources of export and tax revenue in the countries within which they operate, they interact at the highest levels of government to ensure the protection of their interests, as confirmed by the extensive correspondence in the transnational's historical archives. For example, a lobbyist in Panama City wrote headquarters in the late 1910s: "I have never liked to bother Dr. Porras [president of Panama] outside of office hours but my wife has no such scruples, so she went to the *Presidencia* that evening and had a heart-to-heart talk, reminding him of his promises not to increase the banana duty" (BDA: McFarland to Kyes, Feb. 23, 1919). This particular company representative succeeded in manipulating both the Panamanian legislature and the executive:¹⁰ "After conferring with several deputy friends I arranged for the Immigration law to be recalled to second debate and my amendment inserted . . .

and the amendment [was] approved. The export Duty law, however, came up the same afternoon, for third debate but by getting some of my friends to employ obstructionist methods, the third debate was not completed although they did approve several articles including the 2 cents tax on bananas" (BDA: McFarland to Kyes, Feb. 23, 1919).

A few days later he triumphantly wrote headquarters, "the law was passed exactly as we wanted it" (BDA: McFarland to Kyes, Feb. 26, 1919).

The transnational was not usually forced to resort to extra-economic pressure to guarantee the protection of its interests.¹¹ Its sheer size rendered it such an intimidating foe to most Central American governments that they generally acquiesced to its demands. The statistics are self-evident; for example, in fiscal year 1981 the net sales of United Brands were \$4,058,387,000; total assets were \$1,309,428,000; the company owned 91,000 acres and leased an additional 42,000 acres of improved land; the total number of company employees was approximately 46,000 (United Brands 1983a: 1-13, 1983b: 11). In that same year, the entire gross domestic product of Costa Rica and Panama represented only 34 and 95 percent, respectively, of the United Fruit Company's net sales (IMF 1984). Host countries cannot expect to negotiate as equals with such a transnational juggernaut, especially if, as in the case of Costa Rica in 1983, bananas represent their largest single source of foreign exchange revenue. Furthermore, the banana transnationals have bolstered their position vis-à-vis the banana-producing nations by diversifying into unrelated industries, making them less dependent on fruit production for their profits. In 1983, for example, banana sales accounted for only 24 percent of United Brands' consolidated net sales (United Brands 1983b:2).¹²

Despite the transnational's diversity on a global level, within any given subsidiary the complete dependency on foreign export markets rendered local operations extremely unstable; they were at the whim and mercy of the fluctuations of international trade. Sudden changes in world market prices for bananas and cacao have repeatedly forced the transnational to shift drastically production patterns on its Latin American subsidiaries. Most notably during the Great Depression in the 1930s, the company halved its level of production almost overnight in response to a slump in banana prices. Similarly, when West African countries began flooding the world market with cheaper cacao in the 1930s, the company responded by lowering its expenditures for the upkeep of its Sixaola District cacao farms, allowing living conditions and real wages to deteriorate markedly during the 1940s.

Local operations have also been highly vulnerable to noneconomic

international crises such as the virtual embargo on the transport of non-military products on the high seas during World War II. The war, however, enabled the company to diversify into a new, even more profitable crop known as abacá. Abacá is a raw material for rope¹³ and was purchased from the transnational on contract by the U.S. Army from 1942 through 1955, when the Japanese embargoed traditional supplies in the Philippines.

These major production shifts—whether dictated by ecological disaster, international crisis, or political economic calculation—profoundly affected local employment opportunities, resulting in disruptive cycles of boom and bust (see figure 1). For example, wages were lowered and the workforce was considerably reduced in Bocas del Toro during World War I and later during the Great Depression. During World War II, on the other hand, the rapid introduction of abacá spurred the importation of thousands of workers and the augmentation of wages. Opportunities for employment increased again in the 1950s, when the company initiated an extensive program of banana rehabilitation through a labor-intensive system of flood following. The biggest transformation occurred in the 1960s, however, with the introduction of disease-resistant varieties and the construction of packing plants.

The fluctuations in the acreage under cultivation and in the size of the workforce have been considerable.¹⁴ For example, banana acreage in the Bocas del Toro Division rose from 96 in 1948 to 17,386 eight years later (LaBarge 1959:195, 197). In the early 1970s, when several thousand acres of the new varieties of bananas were planted, the transnational's demand for heavy laborers considerably increased. Between 1964 and 1976 there was an average of 4,552 workers in Bocas (Ellis 1983:215). In 1983, during my fieldwork, there were 5,706 day laborers and 887 monthly employees on the company's labor roster. Each one of these major fluctuations drastically affected the ethnic composition of the region as waves of new immigrants arrived during periods of high labor demand only to be forced to emigrate, once again, during subsequent depressions.

The transnational has often willfully promoted this employment instability in order to increase its bargaining power with host governments and with combative labor unions. The company's international diversity provides it with unique leverage over any given host nation in which one of its subsidiaries operate. During my fieldwork, the United Fruit Company had subsidiaries producing and/or purchasing bananas in Costa Rica, Colombia, Ecuador, Panama, Honduras, Belize, Guadeloupe, Jamaica, and the Philippines. Formerly the company also had operations in Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Nicaragua,

and Mexico. Historically, this diversity has enabled the transnational to oblige governments to provide it with incentives (i.e., lower taxes, greater repression of the labor movement, subsidized access to infrastructure, etc.) at the threat of relocating elsewhere. Local production decisions, therefore, are often the product of multinational political bargaining. For example, in 1915 headquarters advised the Bocas division manager to suspend new plantings in Costa Rica and Panama because the company was rechanneling its resources into Honduras, where it had obtained a more lenient concession for land and taxes (BDA: Cutter to Kyes, Sept. 15, 1915).

The particular case of the Bocas del Toro Division is almost a caricature of the transnational's ability to juggle host countries by pitting one nation against the other. Because the plantation spans two countries, the division manager in Bocas has been (and still is) able to threaten each host government with curtailing production and shifting operations to the other side of the border. In 1919, when the Panamanian congress was voting on a bill to raise the banana export tax from one cent to two cents per stem, the Bocas division manager advised the company's representative in Panama City: "It might be mentioned to him [the president] that at least two-thirds of our bananas come from [the] Costa Rica side of the river . . . and that if Panama raises the duty we will be compelled to ship these bananas out by Limon, or construct a wharf at Gandoca" (BDA: Kyes to McFarland, Jan. 7, 1919). The company representative responded: "The President is peculiar in many ways. . . . I would not care to tell him of the Gandoca wharf [see map 2] possibilities—although I have always kept them in mind and have mentioned to many people in [congress] . . . what we would have to do in their neighbourhood as a matter of self-defense were the duties increased" (BDA: McFarland to Kyes, Jan. 13, 1919). The company agent also advised the Panamanian congress "that Panama had no particular advantage over Costa Rica and other neighbouring countries" (BDA: McFarland to Kyes, Feb. 23, 1919).

The company strategy has been to lobby for lower taxes and more generous land concessions in any given division by exaggerating the advantages that it has been offered in a neighboring nation.¹⁵ The figures company representatives cited in these bargaining sessions with the host country government have little to do with reality, as the following confidential report to headquarters illustrates.¹⁶ "The arguments I used to the Commission . . . were the same ones—agricultural development, stability, encouragement of foreign capital, same duty as other countries, etc . . . as formerly used. I laid particular stress on the advantages under which we were cultivating bananas in Guatemala and Honduras,

long term contracts, land grants, etc . . . *without being absolutely certain of my ground, but knowing they knew less than I did*" (BDA: McFarland to Cutter, Oct. 29, 1920, emphasis added).

Such tactics continue today (cf. CEPAL 1982). During my fieldwork on the Costa Rican side of the border I was repeatedly told by managers, foremen, and even workers themselves, that Costa Rica had the highest costs of production of any country in the world. Likewise, on the Panamanian side of the border I was told the exact same thing, that is, that Panama had the highest cost of production in the world. The Union of Banana Producing Countries (UPEB) has documented this practice: "The transnationals, according to the Costa Rican press, argue that the fruit of that country is the most expensive in the world while at the same time they have said the exact same thing about the fruit in Panama, Honduras and other UPEB member countries. Despite the transnationals' argument that Costa Rican fruit 'is not competitive' that country will become the largest banana exporter in the world this year" (UPEB 1983: 34).

The strategic importance of the company's diversified geographic base of operations was highlighted in 1974 when the banana-producing countries attempted to form a cartel and establish a uniform tax of one dollar on each box of bananas exported. The three principal banana transnationals (Castle and Cooke, Del Monte, and United Fruit), who controlled 80 percent of the export banana market, broke the cartel by threatening to withdraw from each country individually, claiming that its neighbor was offering a lower tax rate. Under the threat of losing the income and employment derived from the banana industry, each government, one by one, rescinded its commitment to the one-dollar tax.¹⁷

Geographic diversity has also been useful to the transnational in its confrontations with labor. During strikes, the company could compensate for shortfalls in one division by increasing production in another. The superintendent of the Sixaola District explained to me that the company purposefully maintained a world overproduction of at least one division's worth of bananas in order to guard against strikes and ecological disasters. When production was paralyzed by a strike in one division, quality controls in neighboring divisions were temporarily relaxed and the number of bananas reaching the world market remained constant.¹⁸

Once again, because the Bocas Division spans two nations, it lent itself particularly well to international juggling. The manager of the Bocas Division explained to me that he was able to break a two-month-long strike on the Costa Rican side of the plantation, which completely paralyzed the Sixaola District in January 1982, by compensating on the

Panamanian side of the plantation where there was no work stoppage (see chapter 13). Similarly, during the summer of 1984, the company's Golfito Division on the Atlantic Coast of Costa Rica waited out a three-month strike without significant economic losses merely by increasing production in the Armuelles Division, which lies just across the border in Panama and supplied the same international markets as Golfito (see map 1). Any additional shortfall was easily compensated for by increasing purchases in the company's Ecuadoran Division and by passing boatloads of bananas from the Limón and Bocas divisions through the Panama Canal to the North American Pacific Coast markets serviced by Golfito.

The labor movement was also vulnerable to the regional geographic diversity the company maintained within the same country. For example, in confrontations with union leaders in Panama, the company frequently threatened to withdraw to the "other side of the mountains," where the workers were more obedient. In Costa Rica, the company had three different subsidiaries (Compañía Bananera de Costa Rica, Compañía Bananera del Atlántico, and the Chiriqui Land Company)¹⁹ that operated five banana or African palm plantations (Golfito and Quepos on the Pacific Coast; Guapiles, Siquires and the Sixaola District on the Atlantic Coast [see map 1]). Similarly, in Panama one subsidiary, the Chiriqui Land Company, administered two divisions: Bocas del Toro on the Atlantic Coast and Armuelles on the Pacific.

All these realities—monopoly control, international projection, political influence, and product diversity—translated at the local level into an almost omnipotent control by the United Fruit Company over daily life on the plantation and its periphery. The transnational exclusively provided even the most superficial amenities, from ice for drinking water to electricity after hours in the dance hall. In the words of the former head of the company's public relations department:

The Company owns it all, lock stock and barrel. It owns the clubs and offices, the sheds, the land, the banana plants, every piece of equipment, the golf course and tennis courts, the sewer lines and streetlights and fire hydrants, the railroad lines, the motorcars, the trains, the docks, the boats, the airplanes, the radio stations, every house from the division manager's right down to the lowest worker's, along with every stick of furniture and even the plates they eat from and the knives and forks on the tables. Even the water in the faucets and the electricity in the walls are supplied by the Company. (McCann 1976: 140–41)

Economists refer to these plantation social formations as transnational enclaves. All relationships (whether economic or social) revolve around the company and its international markets. For example, the

Bocas del Toro plantation has been so marginally integrated into its host countries that physical access from the interior of Costa Rica and Panama is difficult. Until the introduction of an airline service in the 1940s, it was easier to get to Bocas del Toro from Boston than from Panama City or San José.²⁰

Bocas Division's nationality has even been ambiguous historically. At the turn of the century the company altered the national status of the Sixaola District in order to oust a rival firm, the American Banana Company, which had obtained a concession to the territory from the Panamanian government in 1903. The United Fruit Company had acquired title to the exact same expanse of land three years earlier, but from the Costa Rican government. When the American Banana Company began building a railroad on its newly acquired Panamanian concession, Minor Keith, of the United Fruit Company, engineered a nationalist outcry in Costa Rica and arranged for Costa Rican soldiers to "occupy" the region and confiscate the "contraband" railroad equipment (see Palmer 1907; Kepner and Soothill 1935: 53-63, for details on the conflict between the United Fruit Company and the American Banana Company). Eighteen years later, in 1921, when Panama and Costa Rica attempted to fight a war to determine the nationality of the territory occupied by the plantation, the company stopped the hostilities and evacuated the warring parties on its ships (Pinzon 1921; *Boston Globe*, March 22, 1921).

The ability of the transnational to shape most aspects of the historical development of the Bocas del Toro region, as well as to control the minute details of the daily life of the plantation inhabitants, has had serious ideological ramifications on the local population. Residents of Bocas del Toro tended to view the company with a fatalist respect. A common phrase was: "If the company is big today, I hope it grows bigger tomorrow so that I can rest assured that my grandchildren will have enough to eat."

THREE / Unequal Confrontation: The Appropriation of Bribri Territory, 1908–1931

Indians can't fight! What they gonna fight you with. Hah! They afraid of you, man . . . them a innocent people man.

—114-year-old Bahamian former banana laborer in the Talamanca Valley

The locomotive came and took out millions and millions of bananas for the *gringos*. . . . But not too much later, the earth tired of giving so many bananas. . . . So they ripped up the train tracks, pulled down the bridges and, after spitting with disdain on the exhausted earth, they left triumphantly . . . but the Indians remained. The humiliated race, brutalized and practically exterminated, was left crying out its pain in the heart of the mountains.

—Carlos Luis Fallas, *Mamita Yunaf*, 1978

The Bribri were the aboriginal inhabitants of what became the Costa Rican half of the Bocas del Toro Division known as the Talamanca and Sixaola districts. The rapid spread of Panama disease on the banana farms planted on the Panamanian side of the Bocas Division in the 1890s obliged the company to expand northward up the Sixaola River, into Bribri territory on the Costa Rican side of the border, by the turn of the century. Although small quantities of bananas had previously been shipped out of Costa Rica by boat across the Sixaola River, it was not until 1908, when the Sixaola Bridge was completed, that large-scale shipments of bananas were transported out of the Sixaola District by rail to the port of Almirante (see map 2).¹

In 1913, the company had already begun preparations for extending its farms farther up the Sixaola River into the Talamanca Valley, which was then the heartland of Bribri territory, and 12,734 hectares of the 13,111 that the company eventually owned in Talamanca were titled prior to November 26, 1913 (BDA: Bocas manager to Boston headquarters, Oct. 31, 1945).² The actual contract to extend the railroad into Talamanca was signed in 1913 with a North American who was to construct it at an estimated cost of 40 cents per yard (BDA: Kyes to Schermerhorn, Oct. 2, 1913). In 1914 a railroad tunnel was blasted through

the mountains blocking the Talamanca Valley and by 1916, 3,000 acres of bananas had already been planted in what was to become the Talamanca District (BDA: Kyes to Cutter, July 25, 1916). In 1920 the company reported an investment of slightly over \$4 million on the Costa Rican side of the Bocas Division, half of which was in railways and \$900,000 in bananas (BDA: Blair to Chittenden, July 12, 1921).

At the height of production in the early 1920s, the Talamanca and Sixaola districts were exporting slightly over 3 million stems of bananas per year (BDA: Blair to Chittenden, July 12, 1921). During this period the company controlled all aspects of production and commercialization. Only 6 percent of the bananas exported were purchased from private farmers.³ The total length of the railroad on the Costa Rican side of the border (from the Sixaola Bridge to the last farm in the Talamanca District) was 45 miles, constituting a two-and-one-half-hour trip.⁴

Numerous eyewitness accounts confirm that the company resorted to violence to oust the aboriginal population in Costa Rica:

[The United Fruit Company] . . . ordered its foremen to get rid of the Indians. They'd say, "Chop the trees down on top of them; the company is taking responsibility." I lived it! You'd feel terrible seeing the Indians fleeing with their little Indian babies in their arms. And the women would run with their few rags hastily tied up in bundles, dropping them along the way without time to retrieve them. And behind them desolation: domestic animals, huts, shelters, graveyards. Everything was wiped out by the avalanche of fallen jungle . . . to fell a *palenque* [traditional Bribri housing compound] 200—sometimes 300—of us would be needed to chop it down. The Indians went hysterical. They wouldn't follow the best paths in their flight. They weren't ready for us; we'd catch them by surprise. (Meléndez 1983: 11–12)

More succinctly, a West Indian laborer recalled: "The Indians was living there [Talamanca]. The company take all the flat lands, rob them, take all the land, and turn them into the back. When them see you coming they gone, keep a moving, keep a moving, keep a moving."

Of course from a legal perspective, the company's acquisition of Bribri territory was legitimate.⁵ The company utilized its standard techniques of land acquisition, purchasing the Bribri lands for symbolic sums through intermediaries who "colonized" it from the government as "virgin jungle." An elderly Bribri, Don Simón Mayorga, who lost his family's holdings in this manner, described the process to me: "We did not realize that the landlords from Cartago and San José, those people, had gotten a hold of all the lands from the mouth of the Sixaola River till here [Suretka]. They had taken out papers and we were living here like parasites [derogatory term for illegal land occupant], and parasites we were when the company came in and bought our farms from

the landlords." Nevertheless, the company did not hesitate to take advantage of the infrastructure abandoned by the Amerindian inhabitants of Talamanca: "There are some very good bananas which could be used for seed when our development reaches there . . . [and there are] the remains of the native ranches" (BDA: Adams to Blair, Sept. 9, 1921).

By law the company was obliged to compensate any private farmers located within the confines of the land that it purchased from intermediaries or acquired on concession from the government; its archives contain numerous references to payments to "squatters" (e.g., BDA: "List of [135] Squatters, Talamanca Valley Development," Sept. 21, 1921). Most surnames on these lists, however, are British, indicating that the bulk of the small farmers who received compensation for their huts and plantings were probably West Indian immigrants or Bribri whose fathers were West Indian. In fact company archives reveal that some West Indian speculators made a business out of anticipating where the company intended to plant. They established farms on those lands in order to qualify for compensation pay when they were evicted (BDA: Blair to Chittenden, June 28, 1919). According to Don Simón Mayorga, however, most Amerindians were not paid for their land: "They didn't pay for our land. The little bit we owned became the last section of the company's farm at Sipurio [planted in 1918]. It was the little farm my mother had left us and they didn't pay us; the company never paid us; there were cacao and plantains, but they never paid." Furthermore, newspaper accounts from the 1930s reported that the company's payments to local farm owners were made under false pretenses: "In *La Tribuna* of November 21, 1930, Rogelio Melendez [the journalist] reported meeting a Talamancan Indian who asked him to explain the meaning of two pieces of paper he held in his possession. These turned out to be a check for fifteen dollars from the United Fruit Company and a record of the sale of the Indian's two-hectare farm, which up to the moment he did not realize he had sold to the United Fruit Company" (Kepner 1936:84).

The debility of Bribri resistance to the transnational's usurpation of their prime agricultural lands was rooted in the colonial experience of the Amerindian peoples throughout the Central American Atlantic Coast littoral. Prior to the United Fruit Company's establishment in Costa Rica, the Bribri were subsistence agriculturalists with no integral ties to the larger cash economy. Nevertheless, they had already been profoundly affected by the international world system, especially by the disruptions caused by Spanish and British colonial expansion into the New World. The Bribri and their aboriginal neighbors throughout Talamanca and Bocas del Toro were decimated by the ravages of the Spanish

conquest and by the spread of European diseases in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁶ Subsequently, the repeated raids by the Miskitu Amerindians from Nicaragua disrupted the economies and social structures of the surviving indigenous populations along the coast. From the late 1600s through the mid-1800s, Miskitu military expeditions regularly descended as far south as Chiriqui Lagoon, raping, killing, and pillaging (Helms 1982; Herrera 1981; Holm 1978). The violent raids of the Miskitu obliged all the Amerindian peoples residing along the Atlantic littoral from Honduras down to Bocas del Toro to flee up the rivers into the highlands, abandoning their coastal lands and communities.

Ironically, these Miskitu attacks on the region where the plantation is now located were, to a large extent, an outcome of the British crown's attempt to expand its sphere of influence on the Central American mainland in the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries. The dramatic military and economic expansion of the Miskitu from the 1600s through the first half of the 1800s was a product of the protracted Anglo-Spanish struggle for hegemony in the Caribbean (Holm 1978). This process was initiated unofficially in the late 1600s by French, Dutch, and British buccaneers, who provided the Miskitu with firearms and machetes in return for help as guides, fishermen, and foot soldiers against the Spanish. Once Jamaica was established as a colony of Great Britain, the British crown founded an official "alliance" with the Miskitu. In addition to supplying them with firearms, the British brought one of the many Miskitu leaders to Jamaica in 1687, and crowned him "king of the Mosquitia." With British firearms and a new political structure legitimized internationally, the Miskitu became the most powerful military force on the Atlantic littoral. They established an empire that extended from Trujillo, Honduras, to Bocas del Toro, Panama. The Miskitu king even managed to collect regular tribute from the Costa Rican government in return for a guarantee that Miskitu raiders would not sack the cacao plantations in Limón (Fernández 1969:100).⁷ As late as 1845, the Miskitu king, escorted by a British warship, planted his flag on Bocas del Toro Island, demanding that the population show allegiance to "their natural lord" (Ganuza 1979:62).

Oral history accounts of the Miskitu attacks by local inhabitants in Talamanca and Bocas del Toro (cf. Reid 1983; Palmer 1977) document the forced evacuation of the aboriginal peoples from the entire coast of southern Costa Rica through northern Panama.⁸ Most geographical place names along the coast are derived from Miskitu words (Conzemius 1922:300-303). In fact the very name *Talamanca* means "place of blood" in Miskitu. All the rivers watering the Bocas Division today have Miskitu names: *Sixaola* means Banana River (*sixa* = banana and

awala = river); *Changuinola* means river of the Changuines; *Sansán* means Vegetable River. Even the Cricamola River in the heartland of Guaymí territory is from the Miskitu word for seagull (*krikam*).⁹ The traumatic legacy of the Miskitu may be noted in the threat Guaymí parents still use to discipline children: "If you don't behave, the *Musiki* [*Miskitu* in Guaymí] will come and take you away."

From the company's point of view, the practical effect of these Miskitu raids was to reduce drastically the density of the inhabitants along the fertile valleys closest to the coast. Ironically, therefore, the company benefited from the Anglo-Spanish colonial rivalry that had promoted the Miskitu incursions into the region over one hundred years earlier. For example, the entire Sixaola District had formerly been inhabited by Bribri who fled from the Miskitu attacks of the late seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries (personal communication, Marfa Eugenia Bózzoli de Wille).¹⁰ When the company planted the area in the early 1910s, consequently, there was no local population left to displace on the lower portions of the Sixaola River.

The inability of the Bribri to resist the loss of their lands in Talamanca can be understood as the logical outcome of the contact between one of the most sophisticated representatives of monopoly capital in the world and a subsistence agriculturalist people. The Bribri were illiterate, did not have firearms, had no influence in the central government, and spoke neither Spanish nor English. As Don Simón Mayorga explained: "How were we going to fight back? There was no one to defend us; there was nothing we could do. I was a little boy at the time. We were very very simple, and they did exactly as they pleased with us. We didn't speak Spanish; we went up into the hills."

Significantly, in contrast to the "helpless" Bribri, the non-Americans living in Talamanca were able to defend their land claims successfully. As Don Simón Mayorga noted, "The only land the company didn't touch was that of the priests who were from the United States in Amubri. That was the only place they respected because it was marked by a wire fence." The detail of the "wire fence" highlights the difference between alienating land from a precapitalist people versus one fully integrated into the world economy. The Bribri at the turn of the century lacked an understanding of the very concept of private property. None of them had titles to their ancestral lands; they did not even know what a "property title" meant.¹¹

Although I have emphasized the ease with which the transnational obtained the land in the Bocas Division, there was, in fact, some organized resistance in the Talamanca Valley to the company's expansion. Significantly, however, it was the West Indian settlers who led the op-

position to the United Fruit Company. (By the late 1910s, they were establishing themselves as small farmers among the Bribri.) These black immigrants had a greater capacity for resistance than did the Bribri. Having formerly worked as day laborers, the West Indian settlers in Talamanca had previously had extensive contact with company officials as well as with foreign authorities in general. In fact, as will be documented in chapter 5, most had probably participated in strikes or work stoppages against the transnational. Furthermore, they were literate and fully integrated into the cash economy; many lived as merchant/barterers among the Bribri and accumulated wealth by trading in bananas, cacao, hides, domesticated animals, and sarsaparilla.

The best known of the "black Indian" leaders was the father of Alberto Dixon, who is also a Bribri leader today. Dixon's father was a Jamaican brought to Costa Rica on contract by Minor Keith (one of the founders of the United Fruit Company) to work on the trans-Atlantic railroad. Upon completion of the railroad, he moved to Talamanca, where he homesteaded a banana farm on hilly terrain too marginal for company production. He was, as his son is today, bicultural and trilingual (English, Bribri, and Spanish). He was fully integrated into Bribri society, practicing the traditional form of sororal polygamy; at the same time, however, he was a leading member of an all-black male lodge. His son, Alberto Dixon, explained, "As he was the only person with some understanding and learning, he became the champion of the indigenous people and he went on various delegations to San José [the capital] to talk with the government to put a halt to what was happening and to demand that they pay for the houses the company was burning. The company did pay a few people."

In order to participate in the land struggles, black settlers had to redefine their ethnicity.¹² For example, according to the younger Dixon, the manager of the Bocas Division told his father he had "no business getting involved in the Bribri's business." When Dixon senior responded that he was a Bribri, the North American manager retorted, "If you are an Indian I'm a Chinaman." Dixon's decision to fight for the Bribri eventually cost him his livelihood, because the transnational retaliated by blacklisting him and refusing to purchase his bananas or cacao. The best documentation of the differing ability for resistance of blacks and Amerindians (and Hispanics) is provided by the company's extensive internal correspondence on the subject. For example, the Bocas division manager wrote his supervisor in Limón:

We have not had trouble with a single Indian; the trouble is mostly with negroes and some spaniards but very few or any of them are costarican. . . .

If these people were Indians or natives [Costa Rican Hispanics] I am sure we would have no trouble with them and could deal with them, but they are renegade niggers, Panamanians and Colombians, and are naturally bad characters, and would not have the least objections to resisting forcible expulsion by forcible resistance [sic]. (BDA: Kyes to Chittenden, Dec. 9, 1916)

In other words, threats and violent eviction worked effectively in the case of the Bribri (and Hispanics) but not against blacks. In 1916, following a wave of land invasions by Amerindian squatters in Talamanca, the company lawyer reassured the Bocas division manager not to worry. He advised him merely to issue energetic threats against the Bribri residing on company land since "the Indians are timid and I am sure that by insisting strongly they will abandon all pretension of ownership of the land" (BDA: Mullins to Kyes, Dec. 7, 1916).

Although black immigrants led the resistance to the company's appropriation of the Talamanca Valley, the Bribri, within the context of their traditional culture, had at least one institutionalized means for protecting themselves against the outside world and for pressuring for their interests: a king. Since the 1870s the Bribri king had been officially recognized by the government of Costa Rica as the leader of the Bribri people, and he received a salary from the state. Occasionally he would go on delegations to the capital to negotiate with the Costa Rican government. Had there been a powerful monarch alive during the period when the company was clearing away the Bribri communities to plant bananas (1913–14), it would have been considerably more difficult for the transnational to operate in Talamanca. Significantly, the Bribri king was poisoned under mysterious circumstances in 1910, at approximately the same time that the company began to plan its future expansion into the Talamanca Valley.

Elderly Bribri claim that the company was responsible for poisoning the monarch. The king had advocated limiting the access of non-Amerindians to his territory: "[The king] was one of the people most opposed to the entrance of the white men. He did not want to let them pass beyond Suretka where he lived. And he did not want them to exploit the lands of Talamanca. But the company managed to enter. The company paid for the king to be killed in order to be able to enter and do what they pleased in Talamanca" (cited in Lynch 1982: 35). According to Dixon, the company had originally "tried to buy [the king], granting him a few privileges so that he would not complain." When that strategy failed, however, "in order to prevent him from causing them problems, they [the company] eliminated him." Significantly, eight days after the king was poisoned, his successor suffered the same

fate, along with two of his closest advisers, also protagonists in the fight for Bribri sovereignty over Talamanca.¹³

Popular versions of how the king died have been politicized. Non-Amerindians, and those Bribri who favor the presence of the government and foreign companies in Bribri territory, claimed that the king had poisoned himself by mistake in a drunken debauch when he confused a vial of iodine for a bottle of liquor. In contrast, those Bribri who were most adamant in the defense of indigenous rights (territorial integrity of the Reservation, bilingual education, etc.), insisted that the transnational had murdered the king. They have converted him into a symbol of Amerindian resistance to foreign penetration and exploitation. The tradition of indigenous resistance has become especially important since the late 1970s when the government, in consortium with a Mexican company (Refinería Costarricense de Petróleo [RECOPE]), initiated oil exploration operations throughout the territory currently occupied by the Bribri.

Regardless of how the king really died, the Costa Rican government recognized no successor and the institution of the Bribri monarchy subsequently disappeared. Several "pretenders" emerged, however, and even without official legitimation they managed to mobilize a certain amount of opposition to the company, as the following letter to the Bocas division manager indicates, "Ramon, the uncrowned king, . . . planted a large patch of corn near the old palace at Tunsula" (BDA: Adams to Blair, March 25, 1921). The text of another company letter indicates that, at least briefly, the Costa Rican government may have considered recognizing one of the new Bribri king's land claims against the transnational: "They say the Indian king came from San Jose with word from the President that they could go ahead with [farm] work regardless of the company" (BDA: Superintendent of Agriculture to Blair, Nov. 6, 1916). The institution of the Bribri monarchy was, however, ineffective in combating the company's appropriation of Talamanca, as the following protest written by a son-in-law of the deceased king illustrates:

At Coroma Talamanca I have two pieces of land which for a long time have been cultivated with cocoa and other products, which I acquired with my wife by will of her father, the king of that region Sr. Francisco Saldaña. Now I am prohibited to work those lands by the representatives of the United Fruit Company at that place, alleging that the company owns the land. Apart of [*sic*] the rights which since immemorial times I have acquired, due to the possession of the first cultivators of the lands which I have continued for so many years, I cannot see how the United Fruit Company can have

acquired a cultivated land in those conditions and much more that it considers itself with a right to exact from me the ejection from [what] legitimately belongs to me. . . . The act they are trying to exercise is out of order. [sic] (BDA: William Smith to Mullins, Jan. 17, 1914)

Unable to resist the company's penetration through institutionalized political and legal channels, the Bribri resorted to witchcraft. Today, the Bribri claim that their *usekra* (head shaman) was successful in driving the transnational out of their territory by provoking floods and spreading disease. Indeed, in the early 1920s, the crisscrossing rivers in the Talamanca Valley began changing course, knocking down bridges, ripping up railroad tracks, and destroying the plantations. Floods, combined with the prevalence of Panama disease, forced the company to reduce operations in Talamanca in 1927 (*El Diario de Costa Rica*, Nov. 25, 1927).

In 1928, following a major flood that drowned several people, Surrctka, formerly a railhead junction, was made the final stop on the Talamanca line (see map 2). With each passing year, more and more track and bridges were disassembled. Most of the infrastructure was systematically destroyed to prevent competitors from being able to take advantage of it in the future. Some of the track and bridge pylons were shipped out to other divisions for reuse. By 1930, the telephone system had been dismantled, the railroad removed, and twenty-seven bridges physically destroyed (*La Tribuna*, April 30, 1930).

As with the conflicting versions of the poisoning of the king, the differing interpretations of the company's retreat from Talamanca have been politicized and transformed into a symbol of Amerindian resistance. Non-Amerindians provided a "scientific" explanation for why dramatic flooding occurred within a few years of the company's entrance into the Talamanca Valley. They explained that the company had cut down all the timber along the watershed of the Sixaola River thereby causing its tributaries to overflow and change course. Bribri Amerindian leaders rejected this explanation. Don Simón Mayorga, for example, asserted that the floods began when the company seized the burial ground belonging to the "great *usekra*" who "threw the water down on them by praying." According to his version, the North American foreman who ordered the planting of this sacred burial ground was turned into a stone during the flood. Don Simón even claimed that the *usekra* who caused the floods was also responsible for the prevalence of Panama disease, which he prepared as a magic potion and spread over the farms at night.¹⁴

Significantly, an elderly West Indian who sympathized with the

Bribri attempts to reclaim their lost lands also ascribed the "eviction" of the company to the effectiveness of Amerindian resistance:

The company had a bad foreman there and the Indians were living on a piece of land and the foreman go there and worry the men them and run them out of the land. Well, them made a complaint to the head man, them of the United Fruit Company but they didn't pay them no mind. And they say all right they will see what gwona happen to Talamanca and they go up in the river, a way up, and they spent three months blocking up the water between two hills, the two sister hills, waiting on the weather, waiting on the rain make a flood. About a hundred odd of them work there. I know the place, I go right there and see that. They take leaves and wood and dammed the place. Go right up, go right up. And when they finish it the rain start to come down good now and full it right up and they let it go. It mash up the whole place. A thousand odd people drown. The water carry away the houses and all them things.

Several Bribri told me with pride that a shaman had placed a jinx on RECOPE, the Mexican oil company digging in Talamanca. A rumor was circulating that the drill bit kept breaking mysteriously and that the baffled Mexican engineers had sought an audience with the shaman to beseech him to release the jinx.

Regardless of the objective causes for its retreat, by 1931 the company no longer operated in Talamanca. By 1934 all the land on the Costa Rican side of the border was virtually devoid of banana, with only 32,207 stems exported compared to 2,812,000 stems in 1924 (*Memoria de Fomento* 1934: 229). By planting cacao on the exhausted and infected soils, the company formally retained possession of its holdings in the lower Sixaola Valley as far as a farm known as Volio at the entrance of the Talamanca Valley (see map 2).

The indigenous people viewed the company's retreat from Talamanca as a triumph and almost immediately descended from the headwaters, where they had taken refuge, and reoccupied the flat lands formerly planted in bananas. The 1930s represented a period of retrenchment by the company throughout the Bocas Division, primarily due to the spread of Panama disease. Only 81,600 stems were exported from the entire division in 1939, and all shipments were suspended in 1941 (BDA: Loose papers). The consequent reduction in labor demand pushed many Hispanic and West Indian day laborers out of the labor market. They emigrated to Talamanca and settled among the Bribri. This period marked the beginning of the transition in which the Bribri people became small farmers.

FOUR / The Bribri and the Cash Economy: From Subsistence Agriculturalists to Small Farmers

Them [traders] rob the poor Indians. You will carry a dog—that's the chief thing they like, a dog. You carry a dog and get two, three hog; you come down and make plenty money. How [the Bribri] gonna get vexed if they don't know nothing? Them is an innocent people man.

—114-year-old Bahamian former banana laborer in the Talamanca Valley

The Talamanca [Bribri] Indians don't try to progress; they don't try to save; no one tries to be richer than anyone else in their society. They're a funny people. What's their problem?

—Manager of the Bocas Division, 1983

Although the company successfully appropriated the most fertile portions of the Bribri's land when it expanded into the Talamanca Valley in the 1910s, this usurpation did not entail a classic process of "primitive accumulation." The Bribri were too marginally incorporated into the capitalist economy to be susceptible to wage labor discipline; they were not "hurled as free and 'unattached' proletarians on the labor market" (Marx 1972a: 716).¹ Nonetheless, a minority of the Amerindians eventually did perform some wage work for the transnational at the height of its operations in Talamanca in the 1920s. Furthermore, an even larger number of Bribri interacted economically with the company, at least indirectly, through market intermediaries.

Trade relations rather than wage labor brought the bulk of the Bribri into contact with the cash economy. In fact, since the 1600s, long before the existence of the United Fruit Company, the Bribri had bartered sarsaparilla, rubber, and animal hides with European pirates and traders. These trade relations, however, had remained incipient through the 1930s and did not require a serious economic and social adjustment to capitalist relations of production. The accounts by West Indian traders who operated in Bribri territory at the height of the company's operations in the region (1910s–20s) indicate that the relationship of the in-

indigenous population to the cash economy was marginal: "They don't have no use for money. If you go to the Indian and ask them how much you want for that pig or cow, they don't know. They don't know money. And they won't accept the change from you unless it is in the coffee tree money [a coin from the colonial period with the design of a coffee tree on it]" (cited in Palmer 1977: 77).

The initial meshing of a precapitalist people into the market economy is by definition based on an unequal relationship. The Bribri were easy victims for the more sophisticated Hispanic and black day laborers. For example, an elderly Jamaican who supplemented his income as a day laborer for the company in Talamanca by trading with the Bribri told me of the large profits he made because of the Bribri's inability to understand cash relations: "You carry gun powder, salt, shirts, pants, and you change it with them. They like anything in red. They give you a 200-pound hog just for a pants. They swap you a cow for a pants and a lady frock; they give you a big cow, a six—seven-hundred-pound cow." To a certain extent, the Bribri's early mercantile relations benefited the company, at least indirectly. The Amerindians sold cows, pigs, and other subsistence items to traders at exceedingly low prices; these goods then reappeared in the plantation economy, lowering the reproductive costs of the transnational's labor force and allowing for the payment of lower wages.

Ironically, the same dynamic that rendered the Bribri vulnerable to extreme exploitation in trade, limited the extent to which they could be directly exploited as wage laborers in the productive sphere. The Bribri had not yet developed sufficient cash needs to be forced to reorient their economy to the external market, much less to engage in permanent wage labor. Perhaps most important, even after the expropriation of their prime alluvial flat lands in Talamanca, as subsistence agriculturalists, the Bribri were never fully shorn of their means of production. Given their minimal needs, they were able to survive on the marginal broken lands upon which they had taken refuge in the highlands. As an elderly West Indian explained to me: "They would do nothing; only plant their rice and dive fish." Survival at such a low level would not have been acceptable to a people integrated into the cash economy.⁷ The retreat of the Bribri into the mountains, although profoundly dislocating, did not imply the destruction of their subsistence way of life.

Furthermore, had large numbers of Bribri even sought wage work, they would not have been suitable to the company: they did not know how to tell time, how to read, write, and count, or even how to recognize the Occidental calendar. Their traditional relations of production were based on reciprocal labor exchange arrangements; the corporate

style of contractual, hierarchical work relations was unfamiliar (and probably unacceptable) to them. A former West Indian laborer described why the Bribri did not enter the local labor market: "The Indians them was wild; they didn't know nothing about work. They don't wear clothes. There's no work at all they could do—nothing. They were, what you call, a people scared of the colored people."

Nevertheless, by the early 1920s a small minority of Bribri individuals, especially those from mixed unions with West Indians, began to engage in wage labor. In fact, to a large extent, the black immigrant workers and traders in Talamanca served as intermediaries for the integration of the Bribri, or at least a minority of them, into the cash economy: "It's just down lately, 1922 coming up 1928, they begin to get a little civilized with the colored people. Because the colored people, the men, them they have to do with the women, them ya understand, man? Having children with them and such the like."

Don Simón Mayorga, quoted in the previous chapter, was the son of a Bribri woman and a Nicaraguan black of West Indian descent.³ Don Simón was among the first Bribri to engage in wage work. In 1922, only a half dozen years after the company had expelled him and his sisters from his mother's farm, Don Simón told me that he hesitantly descended from the headwaters and began working fulltime for the transnational. Typically, he signed up on the crew of a Bribri contractor felling virgin jungle. In his account he specified that he chose a contractor who was a fellow Amerindian (*paisano*).

A significant minority of Bribri society descended from the mountains in the early 1920s to engage in wage labor. This process was described, albeit with some poetic license, by Carlos Luis Fallas who worked for the transnational in the region during this period: "The race conquered at last fled upriver to hide its pain in the heart of the mountains. And way out there the greedy searched them out, and succeeded in enticing back many of these unhappy folk, back by force or through the craving for fire water. Quite simply, the banana company needed slaves for its new plantations" (Fallas 1978a: 74).

According to Don Simón, the Amerindian labor force minimized its social interaction with the black and Hispanic workers. They remained on the margin of social life on the plantation, living in traditional thatched huts with no walls apart from the company-constructed dormitories.⁴ Indeed most Bribri who performed wage labor in these early years did not fully proletarianize themselves. They were not even semi-proletarians (i.e., peasants who seasonally supplement their income from farming with wage labor) as there were no consistent patterns to their bouts of wage labor.

According to a West Indian farmer who occasionally employed them on his private farm in the 1930s: "They [the Bribri] work, but they don't work plenty, plenty. Well, they don't work like the black people work straight, straight. No, no, they want a little money and they work; maybe they work for a two month or a three month and they get what they want and they gone. And don't come back again. Work moreset come onto Christmas. Work for themselves more, plant the rice, corn, and all those things, raise pigs, raise corn, chickens." The Bribri would not submit to accepted norms of labor discipline:⁵ "There only one fault with them. Suppose you get one to work with you, don't stand there with them. They say that you are watching them; they don't like that. If you show them the work and let them know how much you pay them you leave them. You can't be up and down there while they are working. I don't handle them like servants. I looking for help. A poor man can't pay for servants; he pay for help." Nor did they obey the established capitalist norms of contractual behavior: "The Indians are a funny people; if you don't understand them they no work for you. If they don't know you they don't work for you. A very curious people; they don't work for anyone."

TRANSITION INTO A PEASANTRY

Although the Bribri have long since developed permanent cash needs, not one was working in the Bocas Division during my fieldwork. They had access to land and markets in the Talamanca Valley, which was designated as an Indian Reservation by the Costa Rican government in 1976. Consequently they were able to establish themselves as small farmers, producing cacao and plantains. They performed wage labor for neighbors and acquaintances only occasionally when they could not satisfy immediate cash needs from crop sales. They have been integrated into the cash economy, but as semi-independent peasants rather than as agricultural proletarians. In other words, during my fieldwork, it was precisely the extent of the Bribri incorporation into the cash economy, rather than their lack of integration, that kept them out of the plantation labor force.⁶

The refusal of the Bribri to work for the banana companies (or for any other company, such as the oil concern RECOPE, located directly on Reservation lands and paying higher wages, is independent of ethnicity; it is simply part of the common sense logic shared by all small peasants, regardless of their ethnicity: wage work is rejected when cash needs can be satisfied through marketing farm produce. Although most peasants (Bribri, Hispanic, and black alike) told me they could earn

more cash if they worked for the banana companies, they noted that it was not worth the effort because of the difficulty of saving money in the "degenerate atmosphere" of plantation social life. They complained that company work was grueling and demeaning: "You kill yourself; it's for slaves [*Uno se mal mata; es esclavizado*]." Perhaps most important, they objected to the poor treatment by the company foremen. They would not tolerate externally imposed labor discipline; it came as a shock to them to be berated and shouted at by generally arrogant (and racist) foremen who scrutinized every move they made. As independent farmers, on the other hand, "There's no one to hassle you [*nadie le regaña*]" ; "no one's hounding you [*nadie le tiene tallado*]." They often pointed out that on their own farms when it rained they could stay home in bed "warm and cozy [*calientito*]." Similarly, when they woke up feeling sick, they did not have to drag themselves to the fields with a fever lest they be fired for absenteeism. The absence of Bribri (and relatively few blacks) as agricultural laborers in the Bocas Division resulted in a plethora of ethnic stereotypes. Local racist discourse insisted that Amerindians refrained from wage labor because they were irrational and primitive.

A superficial tour through the Indian Reservation "confirmed" this racist discourse, revealing poverty and an underdeveloped infrastructure. There was no electricity or running water; clothes were ragged; and household utensils were minimal. Most houses were huts with mud floors and thatched roofs.

Furthermore, children of banana workers were considerably healthier than those of the peasants on the periphery of the plantation (personal communication, delegate of the Ministry of Health in Talamanca).⁷ Nevertheless, a strict cost benefit analysis (especially when viewed as a long-term investment) might support the decision of the small farmers not to convert themselves into permanent banana workers. During my fieldwork, there was a disproportionate increase in the value of land after a minimal amount of labor had been invested in it. Ownership of "improved" land (i.e., cleared or planted in permanent tree crops) represented one of the most secure ways of saving money. Bribri farmers explained that even though they did not have access to regular sources of cash income as banana workers did, they had greater security. When they fell ill or became debilitated, instead of being laid off by their employer (and finding themselves stranded with their family with no source of income), they could either sell their land or post it as collateral for a loan. Most important, land served as security for old age. Banana workers, on the other hand, were generally fired when they

reached middle age, often finding themselves with no substantial savings and no future means of support.

Finally, in the particular case of the Bribri the ambiguous nature of land tenure on the Talamanca Reservation prevented them from leaving their inherited plots unattended for extended periods for fear of losing them to squatters. This possibility has been exacerbated since 1978 with the completion of the road from Limón, the provincial capital, to the banana plantations which passes by the Reservation. Thousands of landless Hispanic immigrants began entering the region in search of employment. Many of these would-be banana workers became squatters instead and settled directly on the Reservation or on the uncultivated lands in its periphery.

ETHNIC HIERARCHY

A final factor that contributed to dissuading the Bribri from seeking employment on the nearby banana plantation has been the ethnic discrimination to which they have been subjected. Although not openly ridiculed and degraded to the same extent as the Guaymí Amerindians in Panama, the Bribri have been at the losing end of the Costa Rican ethnic hierarchy. Hispanics in the Central Highlands insist that Costa Ricans are a white people and they deny or minimize the existence of Amerindians in their country.⁸

Amerindians employed on the plantation could expect their ethnicity to be the butt of derogatory jokes and comments. For example, they would be called *cholo* (or *cholita* if they were female). Furthermore, social life on the plantation was not comfortable for most Bribri. Interaction among Hispanic immigrant banana workers was louder, rougher, and more "macho" than what a resident of the Talamanca Reservation was accustomed to.

The Bribri have internalized their inferior position in the national ethnic hierarchy. This sense of inferiority has crippled them in their effectiveness as wage workers in the larger society. They displayed the classic symptoms of a dominated ethnic group. For example, Bribri fathers with upwardly mobile aspirations for their children forbade them to learn the Bribri language and chastised them when they lapsed into accented Spanish. Similarly, in the presence of non-Amerindian groups, young Bribri often spoke Spanish with one another even when it was halting and heavily accented.⁹ For many Bribri this internalized self-deprecation inhibited their ability to deal with outsiders, rendering them more susceptible to intimidation and abuse by company super-

visors, and making them less effective in asserting their labor rights or in qualifying for a promotion.

The domination to which the Bribri were subjected in the context of the national ethnic hierarchy outside the Reservation was reflected within the Bribri Reservation in what I have called the local "class/ethnic hierarchy." Non-Amerindians dominated economically the more prosperous communities in the Talamanca Valley centrally located along the roads replacing the company's railway lines (Vargas 1980: 49). Hispanics (and to a lesser extent the phenotypically black Bribri population) controlled local commerce and operated the larger, more prosperous farms.

This class/ethnic hierarchy emerged after the company's retreat from Talamanca in the early 1930s when non-Amerindian merchants, government employees, and former company laborers settled in the valley, staking claims to the territory closest to the transport infrastructure. Once again, Fallas, who supervised the elections in Talamanca in the 1930s on behalf of the Communist party, described this process:

Even after the Yankees of the Fruit Company had left [Talamanca], the Creole authorities stayed behind. They remained to become a permanent malediction, like voracious vultures ready to gorge themselves on the rotting carnage of the conquered race.

And hopefully the Indian won't think of trying to plant anything to sell it. . . . They take what the Indian brings to market for a pittance. But whatever he purchases he pays for its weight in gold: Sugar is gold in powder to the Indian; salt as well.

Little by little the Indians lost everything, until they were reduced to their present condition: 80 percent have absolutely nothing. They desperately scratch the sides of the mountains to obtain a handful of coffee, another of corn, and a few bananas; then they bend double beneath their bundles like beasts of burden, to bring these products to their huts.

Exhausted, beaten, the poor Indian climbs back up into the mountains and once again collapses into his miserable ranch, to continue to stuff corn and boiled bananas down his throat until he dies annihilated by cough, diarrhea, malaria, or snakebite. (1978a: 75-76)

Fallas's account includes, in addition to economic exploitation, a description of the ideological oppression of the Bribri, their humiliation by non-Amerindian authorities:¹⁰ "They leave them as payment . . . the stupor of alcohol in their souls, the sourness of tobacco in their throats, and their women pregnant in their huts" (ibid.: 76-77). Fallas recorded the conversations of Hispanic merchants and government officials bragging about the Bribri women they had raped (ibid.: 66-67).

The extreme economic exploitation and ideological oppression in the

1930s portrayed by Fallas was no longer applicable to the Talamanca Reservation during my fieldwork. Although the region continued to be characterized by the highest illiteracy rate, highest level of infant mortality, the lowest income, and the lowest level of basic services in the country (OFIPLAN 1981; INSA 1980:23), and although non-Amerindians still dominated commerce, the Bribri (at least those living in the flat lands of the Talamanca Valley) have managed to incorporate themselves into the cash economy as relatively successful small farmers. In fact, those living near the transport arteries in Talamanca were so much a part of the market economy that they purchased rice and corn for consumption in order to devote all their land and energy to cash crop production (Vargas 1980:49)."

Perhaps most important, the Bribri were no longer at the very bottom of the local class/ethnic hierarchy. The poorest residents on the Reservation were recently arrived landless Hispanic immigrants. The more prosperous Bribri employed these Hispanic laborers (primarily Nicaraguans and Costa Ricans from the Province of Guanacaste), to perform the least desirable tasks on their farms such as removing underbrush in overgrown cacao orchards.

STRUGGLING FOR THE LAND

Land and regular access to markets have been the crucial factors enabling the Bribri to establish themselves as independent peasants in the modern period. According to a presidential decree in 1976, the Bribri (in conjunction with the Cabécar) were granted a 56,829-hectare Reservation, encompassing almost all of the company's former holdings in the Talamanca Valley (Presidential decree #5904). Officially non-Amerindians are not allowed to settle within the Reservation, and land cannot be bought and sold legally within its confines. In practice, however, Reservation land was openly commercialized and increasing numbers of Hispanic immigrants have been settling among the Bribri (Vargas 1980). Nevertheless, the Reservation did provide the Bribri, at least symbolically, with a degree of long-term security and legal territorial, if not political, autonomy. Perhaps most important, it has also reduced the legitimacy of the transnational's continued claims to ownership of land reclaimed by the Bribri when the company left the valley in the early 1930s.

The ease with which the Talamaqueño population (whether Bribri, Hispanic, or West Indian) reappropriated the company's abandoned farms should not be overemphasized. Company files revealed that from

1919 to the present there have been repeated confrontations in Talamanca with "parasites and squatters." Similarly documents from the legal files of the Costa Rican government's Institute for Agrarian Development [IDA] contained numerous references to "land invasions" by "indigenous families" in the early 1930s (IDALF File folder #540: "Conflicts over Precarious Land Occupation of PAIS"). Land take-overs were so prevalent in the 1930s that the company paid a North American supervisor to collect rent from anyone establishing a farm on its property (BDA: Farm Overseer to Kelley, Oct. 20, 1942).¹² By formally charging rent, the company hoped to maintain its legal claim to its abandoned farms in case it should decide to redevelop the area in the future and to prevent rival companies from being able to establish themselves.

By 1960, however, the company's 14,000 hectares in the Talamanca Valley had been abandoned for so long that the territory's legal status had become ambiguous. A company lawyer reported to his superior, "The people who have invaded these lands [Suretka] do not know exactly if the lands belong to the state or the Chiriqui Land Company" (BDA: Ruiz to Gongora, Nov. 29, 1960). This confusion prompted the company to donate the Talamanca lands to the government in an attempt to extract from them, at the very least, a final political and public relations benefit. Before donating the lands the manager arranged that "an agreement be obtained from the Government that they would, in return for the lands donated, agree to assist us in effecting the removal of squatters from our other Costa Rican holdings." (BDA: King to Holcombe, Dec. 30, 1963).

The company, however, did not renounce claims to all of its former lands in Talamanca. In 1975, when the Costa Rican side of the Bocas Division was transferred to the newly formed joint venture of United Brands and the Costa Rican government, known as PAIS (see chapter 1, note 2), claims on the community of Volio, located on the border of the Reservation, were resurrected (see map 2). In the late 1970s, PAIS began bulldozing the farms around Volio and demanded the eviction of the primarily Amerindian population from the ancient wooden barracks the company had built in the early 1910s.

The local population of Volio, however, succeeded in preventing the company from appropriating their farms and houses. They formed an "indigenous committee," contracted lawyers, and even petitioned directly to the "Most excellent President of the Republic" (IDALF #540: Méndez to Carazo, Aug. 10, 1980). The IDA files revealed that the Bribri (together with the local Hispanic and black residents) were able to mobilize the government bureaucracy against the transnational's at-

tempt to seize their untitled holdings. They even managed to sue the company for the damages caused by the bulldozing of their fields (*ibid.*, Sept. 5, 1977).

The confrontation climaxed ironically on Central American Independence Day (September 15) in 1980 when the Rural Guard, accompanied by Costa Rican PAIS officials, arrived in force at Volio and unsuccessfully attempted to evict physically the local residents (IDALF #540: Report by Ching, Oct. 10, 1980). I was told that the Hispanic and black population of the surrounding region rallied in defense of the inhabitants of Volio.¹³ Because it was the anniversary of Central America's independence the entire community was conveniently mobilized in anticipation of a commemorative parade by the local schoolchildren. When the rural guardsmen entered the first house at the entrance to the community and began throwing out the furniture, the parading school children ran to the second house in line and stretched their parade flag across the doorway. At this point, the largest store owner in Talamanca, a Hispanic who was not personally affected by the eviction since his lawyers had already arranged legal title to his property several years previously, confronted the PAIS representatives and the Rural Guard commander. He accused them of "satisfying the whims of a couple of foreigners on this sacred day of Central American independence," and appealed to their nationalist pride. He invoked the memory of Costa Rica's defeat of William Walker, and admonished them to "behave like patriotic Costa Ricans."¹⁴

Nevertheless, the transnational persisted in its claims on Volio's land. One and one half years later, in February 1982, the company's land warden [*guardabosque*] attempted to remove the community's water tank. The warden, who was a retired colonel from the Costa Rican government's security forces, arrived at midday hoping (according to his aide) to perform the operation without obstruction since all the men of the community were at work in their fields at that hour. To his surprise, however, when he began dismantling the water tank he was surrounded by an irate crowd of women who chased him out of the community. That evening, apparently still in a rage at the personal affront of the Volio women, the colonel died of a heart attack. Following this incident, the company made no further attempts to press its claim over Volio. Ironically, several Bribri pointed to the colonel's sudden death as further proof of the power of their shamans in protecting their territory.

Aside from being an amusing anecdote, the Volio population's success in the late 1970s and early 1980s in preventing the usurpation of its lands illustrates well the degree to which the Bribri have evolved

since the turn of the century. Not only have they gained sufficient economic independence to be able to shun wage labor employment, but they were also able to mobilize political pressure (in coalitions with non-Amerindians) to defend their interests. As the aborted Independence Day eviction demonstrates, they were even able to manipulate Costa Rican nationalist discourse for their own political and economic advantage.

FIVE / West Indian Immigration and the Origins of the Banana Industry

The history of the negro as a laborer is ancient and simple—perhaps more so than that of any other race or people. . . . With few notable exceptions, the negro laborer has little initiative—he is an imitator. . . . experience has proved over and over again that only with rare exceptions has the negro been able to pursue theoretical studies with any degree of success.

—Letter of the manager of all the United Fruit Company's operations in Central America to the British consul in Panama, June 11, 1919

Trouble makers to the West Indian are like fleas to the healthy dog—a necessity albeit an unfortunate one.

—Letter of the British consul in Panama to the manager of the Bocas del Toro Division, May 16, 1919

Black culture in the provinces of Bocas del Toro and Limón has had a special relationship historically with all of the United States-based corporations that have operated along the Atlantic Coast of Central America since the mid-1800s, but especially with the United Fruit Company, which has been the biggest single employer of labor in the region over the longest period of time. In the late 1800s, the growing number of transnationals operating in the Atlantic littoral generated a massive demand for labor, which was largely satisfied by the Caribbean Islands, a large sector of whose peasantries served as a “global labor reserve available and unable to resist being shunted hither and thither . . . wherever the demands of capital beckon[ed]” (Petras 1981:5). The constant booms and busts of local subsidiaries in the Caribbean region sent West Indian migrant laborers scrambling throughout coastal Central and South America in search of stable employment; hence the following complaint filed in 1924 by a United Fruit Company official to his superiors:

Our great trouble since 1919 has been a shortage of labor. During 1920, a large number of the best men went to Cuba where high wages prevailed in the sugar industry. Later more of them left for Honduras and other new developments. During the latter part of last year and the first of this year, a

large number left here and went to the San Blas Coast [where a rival banana Company was initiating operations].

With every rumour of new developments or high wages some leave. Since the war period a large number of West Indians have gone to the United States where they find easier employment than in Tropical Agriculture. These largely comprise the young and able bodied. (BDA: Bocas Division official to Blair, June 13, 1924)

Black culture in Bocas del Toro consequently emerged out of the West Indian diaspora; it has become an integral part of a larger social formation spanning the entire Central American Caribbean and beyond: "A feeling of Kinship relationship and community of interest . . . stretches from Belice [*sic*] and Kingston to Bocas del Toro and Colón" (Parsons 1954: 13). (See map 3.) During the first half of the twentieth century, black immigrants frantically crisscrossed from country to country, company to company, boom to bust. This historical pattern of geographical mobility has obliged me, therefore, to extend my discussion of blacks beyond the confines of the plantation region in Bocas; often the same individual who planted bananas in Bocas del Toro had previously shoveled dirt on the Panama Canal, and later went on to harvest cacao in Limón, only to end up ultimately emigrating to New York to work as an orderly in a hospital.

THE SEARCH FOR A LABOR FORCE

In the 1880s, the biggest problem faced by the banana companies (subsequently merged into the United Fruit Company) operating in Bocas del Toro and Limón was their shortage of wage laborers.¹ Banana exports to the United States had suddenly become a lucrative business and the Bocas-Talamanca region was ideally suited ecologically and climatically for banana cultivation.

The local Amerindian populations of Bocas and Talamanca were not sufficiently integrated into the cash economy to perform wage labor. The only other regional source of labor for the Bocas Division would have been the Hispanic population in the Central Highlands of Costa Rica, but Hispanics were unwilling to convert themselves into full-time wage laborers in the lowlands since they had more attractive economic alternatives in their home communities.² The living and working conditions imposed by United Fruit (and Minor Keith's precursor companies) were exceptionally strenuous and dangerous, even by the Costa Rican and Panamanian standards of the time. This was especially true for the initial years when the jungle was cleared and the basic infrastruc-

ture was built. In the 1880s and 1890s even minimal facilities for living and working were unavailable in Bocas: there was no housing, transport, or potable water; the swamps had not yet been drained; and the area was rife with mosquitoes, pestilent diseases, and poisonous snakes.

Labor scarcity under these kinds of working conditions was not a problem limited to the United Fruit Company; all the firms (most of which were North American owned) operating in the Isthmus faced this problem. The same was even true for the local banana growers, as the following petition sent to the Costa Rican Congress in 1892 illustrates:

We are struggling with a lack of labor power because the demand for labor, which the companies operating in Limón have occasioned, exceeds the supply of natives who have emigrated to this locale; and the workers who come from . . . various other places, in addition to being too few, only with great difficulty can be persuaded to remain for a long time on our *haciendas* and they refuse to settle permanently because we do not have here the facilities and it is only natural that they would go back to their home nations. Frequently we suffer considerable losses due to a lack of workers. (ANCH #3893: May 23, 1892)

During the second half of the nineteenth century, consequently, in order to avoid paying high wages and building an expensive infrastructure, the firms operating in the Atlantic lowlands of Central America began a concerted search for laborers willing to work for low wages under substandard conditions. Thousands of people from all over the world were imported to the region in a process of trial and error. In the words of a Panamanian sociologist, "The Americans thought that various nationalities differed in their capacity to endure physical labor in the tropics, and by expanding the area of recruitment, they hoped to find the best nationality for the job. This belief was consistent with the Social Darwinism and racialist theories of the time" (Davis 1980:75).

During the first two years of his concession for building the Costa Rican Atlantic railroad, Minor Keith obtained six separate contracts from the Costa Rican government for importing foreign laborers, including "one thousand healthy, robust Chinese of good customs and addicted to work as well as being from a cold climate" (ANCH #1055: April 6, 1872; Rodríguez and Borge 1976:193).¹ By the 1890s, however, both Panama and Costa Rica had passed laws forbidding further Chinese immigration. In an attempt to find laborers acceptable to the racial standards of the Costa Rican Congress, Minor Keith imported 1,500 Italians⁴ whom he promoted as "good humble thrifty workers free from the vice of liquor and [who] almost all know how to read and write. Furthermore, they are of a superior race which will do the coun-

try good as they mix in with the rest of the natives" (ANCH #1131: Feb. 23, 1888: 3). Within one year, however, the Italians went on strike and marched to the capital demanding repatriation and back pay (Fallas Monge 1983: 220–31; Stewart 1964). Minor Keith "experimented" unsuccessfully with dozens of other national and ethnic groups including Canadians, Dutch, Swedes, black North Americans, Carib Afro-Amerindians, Syrians, Turks, East Indians, Egyptians, and Cape Verdians (Wilson 1947: 52, 61; Rodríguez and Borge 1976: 227).

Disease was one of the biggest obstacles to maintaining a large labor force in the Atlantic littoral. Although Limón Province contained only 15 percent of Costa Rica's total population, it accounted for 40 percent of all yellow fever deaths; from 1906 to 1925 it had the highest death rate of any province in the country: 30.6 per thousand instead of the national average of 24 (Kepner 1936: 118). It is claimed that during the construction of the first 25 miles of the Costa Rican railroad, 4,000 Jamaicans died (Wilson 1947: 52).⁵ Minor Keith justified to the Costa Rican Congress the delay in the progress of his railroad construction on the grounds that high disease rates were killing off his workers (*Gaceta Oficial*, Dec. 11, 1872). The death rate on the Panama Canal was equally excessive. In 1883 alone, 1,300 laborers perished, and the following year, an American naval officer reported that an average of 200 laborers died per month out of a labor force of approximately 19,200 (McCullough 1977: 161). A *New York Tribune* correspondent reported seeing black workers buried beneath piles of rubble and hearing a local official say: "It was the same every day—bury, bury, bury, running two, three and four trains a day with dead Jamaican niggers all the time" (Aug. 22, 1886, cited in McCullough 1977: 173).

These trial-and-error racist searches for suitable workers finally ceased by the 1890s when it became increasingly evident that black West Indians were the most exploitable. The Panama railroad in the 1850s was the first major company to employ West Indians on a large scale: 1,200 of the 1,590 workers were black (McCullough 1977: 37). By 1884, on the Panama Canal project, 16,249 out of 19,243 workers had been West Indians, and in 1885 alone, 24,301 Jamaicans arrived in Panama to work on the digging of the canal (Bryce-Laporte with Purcell 1982: 223).

In Costa Rica the first group of West Indians contracted to work on the trans-Atlantic railroad arrived in 1872 with tens of thousands more immigrating through 1920 (Duncan and Meléndez 1981: 70–73). Between 1881 and 1891, for example, Keith imported 10,000 blacks from Jamaica (Rodríguez and Borge 1976: 229). Again, between 1911 and

1912, 11,000 Jamaicans left for Central America (Petras 1981: 419). In 1904, of the 5,600 workers on the United Fruit Company's Limón Division, 4,000 were Jamaicans (*Limón Weekly News*, Oct. 1, 1904: 4, cited in Casey 1979: 113). By 1927 there were 19,136 Jamaicans in Costa Rica, almost all in Limón Province (Olien 1967: 126).

In Bocas the largest single influx of West Indians occurred in 1888 when the French company that was digging the Panama Canal went bankrupt and thousands of suddenly unemployed laborers migrated up the littoral to work on Minor Keith's new railroad construction projects. Again in 1914, upon the completion of the Panama Canal, 5,000 of the 10,000 black laborers who were laid off by the canal authorities were absorbed by the United Fruit Company's Bocas and Limón divisions (Lewis 1980: 97). As early as 1894 Keith already had 1,500 West Indians harvesting bananas on his recently established plantations along the Chiriquí Lagoon (Heckadon 1980: 11-12). (See map 2.) The company's first official employment statistic for the Bocas Division (following the merger of all the farms bought or planted by Minor Keith in Bocas del Toro Province in the 1890s) was 2,120 West Indians in 1899 (Medical Department 1912: 54).

A veritable depopulation of able-bodied laborers occurred in the West Indies (cf. Newton 1984). Most dramatically from 1900 to 1910, 40 percent of all adult males left Barbados in search of employment, primarily on the Panama Canal (McCullough 1977: 476). A newspaper reporter in Barbados at the turn of the century described thousands of Barbadian women "wailing at the top of their voices," as a ship of contracted laborers lifted anchor for Central America (Edwards 1913: 29, cited in McCullough 1977: 476). Although the British colonial government by the late 1800s had forbidden direct recruitment from Jamaica, Jamaican laborers continued to emigrate on a massive scale through their own means. Most went to cut sugar in Cuba or to dig the Panama Canal but a significant number ended up on the United Fruit Company plantations in Limón and Bocas.

North American transnationals at the turn of the century were able to obtain top quality agricultural laborers from the West Indies at below reproduction costs (Petras 1981: 417). Most emigrant laborers were raised on subsistence-oriented family farms. They did not offer themselves for employment until they had reached their peak age for hard labor. Furthermore, most West Indians who worked in the banana industry actually paid for the cost of their transport to the site where the transnational most needed them. Company doctors carefully scrutinized recruits and selected only the healthiest and strongest. Velma

Newton's citation (1983: 15) of an eyewitness description of this screening process indicates the quality of labor the transnationals were able to obtain in the West Indies at the turn of the century:

Several Policemen kept the crowd in order and sent them up into the recruiting station. . . . As the men came up, they were formed in a line around the wall. First, all those who looked too old, or too young, or too weakly, were picked out and sent away. Then [the doctor] went over the whole line again for trachoma, rolling back their eyelids and looking for inflammation. Seven or eight fell at this test. Then, he made them strip, and went over them round after round for tuberculosis, heart trouble and rupture. A few fell out at each test. . . . About twenty of one hundred were left in the end.

A disproportionate number of these healthy, strong young recruits who eventually became laborers were to meet premature deaths in Central America.⁶ The plantation in Bocas del Toro had one of the worst health records of any of the United Fruit Company's divisions.⁷ From 1927 to 1929 it had the highest death rate of any of the transnational's eight divisions in Latin America (Kepner 1936: 117). A report by the United Fruit Company's Medical Department on the first years of the Bocas Division is quite frank in this respect:

Malaria has always been prevalent in the [Bocas] district, and is worse in a new area being opened to cultivation. . . .

The sanitary conditions at Rio Caucho, Robalo, Chiriquicito, and Cricamola [the original farms of the Bocas Division] were very bad. Little was known then of proper sanitary methods, and malaria and yellow fever were rampant. The first two years proved the worst in the history of the Company, with a death-rate of five per cent per annum among white people treated. As there were no hospital accommodations for colored people, a record of their death-rate was impossible. (Medical Department 1912: 53-54)

Why were the West Indians willing to tolerate these kinds of working conditions more than other population groups? The answer lies in the economic conditions prevailing in the Antilles at the close of the nineteenth century. The Caribbean black peasantry and agricultural proletariat had only just emerged from slavery when the sugar economy plunged into a deep depression, exacerbated in 1874 by the removal of protective sugar tariffs by Great Britain. British capital, which dominated the region's economy, was undergoing a serious retrenchment. Hunger and unemployment abounded. Young men were desperate to obtain work of any sort as wages were below subsistence throughout the West Indies. For example, in Barbados, a day's wage was twenty cents at the turn of the century, when United Fruit Company labor contractors were offering to pay the same amount per hour. The unemployed

were so desperate that riots erupted outside the recruiting stations of the Panama Canal Company in Barbados (McCullough 1977: 170).

West Indian laborers were tolerant of exceptionally rigid plantation labor discipline because of their particularly brutal history of slavery in addition to their background of abject poverty. Most of the grandparents and even some of the parents of the migrant laborers on the United Fruit Company subsidiaries had been slaves. Consequently, the forms of labor control and discipline considered intolerable by Hispanic Costa Ricans, Italians, or other European immigrants were seen as "normal" by Jamaicans or Barbadians. West Indians were also familiar with plantation relations of production. Most had been raised in their home countries as semiproletarianized peasants who supplemented their income from farm produce (including banana cultivation) with wage labor on large estates. Sudden immersion into intensive plantation wage work did not cause them profound cultural dislocation as it did population groups from more independent peasant backgrounds.

A subtler, but no less important factor facilitating the exploitation of West Indians by the United Fruit Company was the history of ideological domination of the black population in the British West Indies. British colonial society was profoundly racist. A rigid hierarchy was constructed on skin color; the omnipotence of the white plantation owner and colonial authority figures was deeply ingrained in the population's consciousness (see Lowenthal 1968). Unlike Central American Hispanics, Cape Verdians, or Europeans—to whom the racism of North American managers against all darker skinned peoples, regardless of color tone, was unpalatable—black West Indians were familiar with racist social relations (cf. Hochtink 1985). They more readily endured a social order that legitimized inferior treatment, housing, and pay based on phenotype. Accounts by racist white North Americans from the turn of the century repeatedly praise the West Indians for their exceptional courtesy: "There was nothing even faintly resembling insolence, for these were all British West Indians without a corrupting 'States nigger,' among them" (Franck 1913: 37–38, 43).

WERE THE WEST INDIANS DOCILE?

Company reports and newspaper articles from the turn of the century abound with praise for the West Indian laborers in Central America: "The black Jamaicans employed in Limón are an admirable collection of men and are very well behaved" (*Gaceta Oficial*, April 11, 1874: 3, cited in Duncan and Meléndez 1981: 75). "The blacks are good workers and in general are docile" (*El Diario el Comercio*, April 7, 1887: 2,

cited in Duncan and Meléndez 1981:78). "The Jamaicans are among the most tranquil peace-loving people in existence" (*El Correo del Atlántico*, Feb. 18, 1915:1, cited in Casey 1979:125).

Costa Rican scholars have cited this kind of documentation and argue that West Indians were docile workers who did not engage in strikes or work stoppages. For example, most historical accounts of the construction of the Costa Rican interoceanic railroad report that, when Minor Keith (the contractor) ran out of financing in 1874, several hundred Jamaicans continued to work for him for eight months without receiving their pay (cf. Duncan and Meléndez 1981:104; Fallas Monge 1983:218). Jamaicans supposedly suffered from an ideological complex rendering them peculiarly susceptible to Keith's charisma. For example, "they identified themselves spiritually with their contractor, Mr. Keith, in his effort to finish the project. . . . The blacks from Jamaica tolerated the crisis with passivity and cooperated in order to finish constructing the railroad" (Duncan and Meléndez 1981:77). Again, "Keith had the total support of the black population because he was able to pass for British. Such was their loyalty to him. . . . They believed in him, in his word of honor. They were demonstrating the power of the Empire, its capacity" (ibid.: 104).

Today, the descendants of the West Indian laboring population have internalized the popular interpretation of their ancestors as passive and obedient to authority. "We have always been a peaceful people; we never got involved in labor troubles; Jamaicans don't understand those kinds of things; first time [in the old days] we never know about no *sindicatos* [unions]. No no no!" Black passivity has emerged as a racist stereotype among Hispanics in Limón and in Bocas del Toro. "Blacks are conformist; they'll work for peanuts [*trabajan por cualquier cochinnada*]. They've always been docile [*han sido mancos toda la vida*]. They're pussies by nature. They bend with the breeze [*Son pendejos: bailan el son que les tocan*]." Popular discourse insists blacks were never combative workers. Even the Costa Rican Communist party and the militant tendency within the labor union movement maintain that the first generation of black immigrant workers were passive. Rank-and-file union members as well as intellectual Communist party militants, when discussing the legacy of the contemporary union movement cite two major strikes in which black participation happened to be minimal or nonexistent: the 1934 banana strike which was led primarily by Hispanics, and the 1888 work stoppage of the Italian railroad builders. The Costa Rican Communist party's publications, which purposefully glorify the historical legacy of proletarian struggles among banana workers, fail to document labor strife among the early West Indian immigrants.

Closer scrutiny of the available primary source material, however, refutes the myth that blacks were passive at the turn of the century. Even a cursory examination of historical archives uncovers a plethora of violent strikes, labor disturbances, and attempts at union organizing by the West Indian laborers in the 1910s and 1920s. Unfortunately, few published sources deal systematically with the resistance of blacks to exploitation in Limón and Bocas del Toro during this period.⁸ The most detailed account is a mimeographed article by Vladimir de la Cruz (1979), based on newspaper reports from the period.⁹ Although there are occasional references to black combativity, no open debate exists in the literature. One merely finds diametrically opposed statements of fact. For example, "Jamaicans had proven to be the most problematic of the laborers, the leaders of most of the early aggressions" (Bryce-Laporte n.d.: 23). On the other hand, "the most significant characteristic of the banana industry's labor force was its almost total lack of a labor organization or disturbances. . . . The few labor disturbances that did arise, originated among those of Hispanic extraction and not among the numerous Jamaicans who dominated the labor force" (Casey 1979: 119).

To a certain extent these contradictory interpretations are due to the inconsistency of the primary source material and to the ideological mystification which has accompanied the upward economic mobility of the West Indian immigrants since the 1930s (see following chapter). Consequently, depending upon which period one prefers to emphasize, or which newspaper one chooses to believe, black immigrant laborers can be presented as either combative or passive. Furthermore, the most frequently cited primary source material was generated by company reports and promanagement local newspapers, which emphasized the passivity of the black laborers. Threatened by increasingly racist immigration laws, company officials strategically exaggerated the qualities of West Indians in order to persuade host countries to allow them to continue importing black laborers.

The earliest recorded confrontation between black workers and management occurred on the Costa Rican trans-Atlantic railroad in 1879 (*Gaceta Oficial*, March 1879, cited in Fallas Monge 1983: 218). The level of tension among black workers around this time is illustrated by an account of another violent conflict eight years later. "Some of the black workers tried to chop up two foremen of the white race with their machetes; the attacked men were forced to use their revolvers. . . . Two blacks were wounded and there was a riot" (*El Diario el Comercio*, April 7, 1887: 2, cited in Duncan and Meléndez 1981: 78). Indeed, it is only logical that the poor working conditions of railroad construction

and of banana production in a plantation setting should have been conducive to labor unrest. By the early 1890s, the banana farms in Bocas and Limón (which were later merged into the United Fruit Company's monopoly in 1899) were veritable "factories in the field," amassing literally thousands of laborers into a concentrated locale.

Labor unrest swept the company's Bocas and Limón divisions immediately before and after World War I (1909-13 and 1919-21). An Artisans and Labourers Union, composed almost exclusively of West Indians, formed in 1910, at the height of banana production in the Limón Division (*Jamaica Times*, March 12, 1910:1). In response, the company began firing all the black foremen who were members of the union. A general strike was declared in Limón, and a violent confrontation erupted when the company imported 700 strikebreakers from St. Kitts.¹⁰ The police fired into the crowd wounding forty-eight strikers (de la Cruz 1979:42; *El Tiempo*, Nov. 22 through 29, 1910; *Times*, March 1, 1910:1; and *Jamaica Times*, March 2, 1910:1; July 30, 1910:22; Aug. 27, 1910:13; Dec. 10, 1910).

De la Cruz claims that the Limón labor movement was infused with a distinctly political, anti-imperialist tenor. He cites a 1910 demonstration in Port Limón in solidarity with Nicaragua, which had been occupied by U.S. marines the previous year, and he mentions an "anti-imperialist incident" whereby the dock workers protested the hoisting of the North American flag on a United Fruit Company ship at dock (de la Cruz 1979:39, 42). It is probable, however, that these events were led by Nicaraguan Hispanics rather than by West Indians. Nicaraguans were just beginning to enter the banana region at this time and they had previously had negative experiences with the occupation of their home country by U.S. marines. De la Cruz (1979:41) also notes a "Worker's Party" in Limón at this time, but it was short lived.

Whatever their formal political content, the work stoppages figured prominently in the local press throughout the early 1910s. Almost all these strikes resulted in casualties owing to police repression (de la Cruz 1979:43-44; *Times*, April 21, 1911:1; June 13, 1913). The most violent strike occurred in March 1913 in the Sixaola and Talamanca districts of the Bocas Division. A riot erupted when the company attempted to break the strike by importing 200 Nicaraguan Hispanic laborers (*La Información*, March 25, 1913:5; March 26, 1913:3; March 29, 1913:2). The Costa Rican government sent troops to protect the strikebreakers but when the first group of 150 soldiers were disembarking from the company boats transporting them to the plantation, a mass of angry West Indian workers stormed the docks. At the company's request, 50 Panamanian soldiers were mobilized along the border on the Panama-

nian side of the division to prevent the strike from spreading (*El Heraldo del Atlántico*, March 31, 1913:2). By the end of the strike (one and a half months later) one West Indian had been killed, two had been wounded, and dozens beaten. The leaders of the strike, including all the machinists and wagoners in the Railroad Department, were fired (*La Información*, March 30, 1913:3; de la Cruz 1979:49).

These conflict-ridden years were characterized by high levels of banana production; several major new districts, including the Talamanca District of the Bocas del Toro Division and the Estrella Valley District of the Limón Division, were opened up to banana cultivation (*Times*, May 12, 1913:2). Periods of clearing and planting virgin jungle are always the most problematic. Basic infrastructure has not yet been constructed, insects and snakes abound, and the work itself (clearing virgin jungle and draining swamps) is especially strenuous. These conditions on the new farms deep in the jungle must have appeared particularly unacceptable to those laborers who had been transferred from the older, well-established districts of the Limón Division.

The rapid increase in the prices of basic necessities and the failure of wages to follow suit precipitated the strikes following World War I, an international phenomenon among black workers throughout the American diaspora. Black soldiers returning from fighting in Europe were increasingly resistant to racial discrimination and economic exploitation (cf. UNIA documents, cited in Hill 1983:6, 332; Foner 1981:144-57; BDA: unidentified company informant to Blair, April 16, 1920). Both the Limón and Bocas del Toro divisions were racked by major bloody strikes during this period. As in the case of the pre-World War I disturbances, local newspapers abound with stories of work stoppages. In fact, the English language press coverage during this period in both Costa Rica and Panama was generally openly critical of the transnational, attacking it for having "made big profits while the worldwide war was going on" (*El País*, Oct. 6, 1919:4).

Once again, the largest, and most violent strike occurred in the Sixaola District of the Bocas Division. It began on December 2, 1918, and lasted for three months. The striking workers demanded a wage hike from ten to twenty-five cents per hour, and all accounts confirm their desperate economic plight. In fact six months before the strike the division manager had warned headquarters that there would be serious labor disturbances if wages were not raised (BDA: Kyes to Chittenden, Aug. 30, 1918). The colonial officer sent by the British government to examine the situation berated the division manager in a formal letter of protest when the company asked him to assist it in expelling two West Indian "labor agitators":

The cost of living in January 1919 was, at a fairly moderate estimate, over 100% higher than was the case in August 1914. This means that your coloured employees had to live half as well in the beginning of this year as they could afford to live in 1914. I think you will agree that this [is] a pretty bad proposition for any man and the facts are that your labourers found it quite impossible to provide for themselves and their families in anything like an adequate degree. The conditions with which some of the men had to put up (and I am going solely by what men, who were indicated to me by your officials as being the most trustworthy and loyal indicated to me) were little short of tragic. There can be no doubt, therefore, that the wages at the time of the strike were a long way below subsistence level.

I am positive that low wages and high prices constitute the whole problem. So long as such conditions endure your agitators have splendid material with which to work and we are almost powerless to help you. (BFO #371-3856-2850: Murray to McFarland, May 16, 1919)

Nevertheless, the company refused to negotiate with the strikers; instead, Hispanic strikebreakers were imported, and the company requested police protection from the Costa Rican and Panamanian governments. Not only were strikers arrested en masse and ejected from company housing, but even those workers who had fled into the jungle and constructed shelters on government land contiguous to company property were searched out and arrested or had their huts burned. In most cases the victims were unable to evacuate their possessions, and a long list of lost valuables was presented to a British consular commission sent to investigate (BCO #318-350-2976: Murray to Mallet, Feb. 23, 1919:8). The company even went so far as to "root up and burn" the plots of vegetables and fruits that most workers had planted in order to supplement their meager wages during the war period. Ninety percent of the workers "were driven to take refuge in the foothills or bush where they suffered privations" (BCO #318-350-2946: Murray to Mallet, Feb. 3, 1919:9). Mr. Bettel survived this strike and was 114 years old when he described to me how he fled through the jungle in terror. He claimed that men died of hunger while "hiding in the bush." Another elderly West Indian veteran of this strike told of how he was held in jail with sixty-eight other strikers by the Panamanian authorities on Bocas Island. The British consular legation investigating the complaints of the West Indians noted that the workers had been "arrested wholesale with but little discrimination" (BCO #318-350-2946: Murray to Mallet, Feb. 3, 1919:10). They forwarded to the Colonial Office testimony from 168 cases of abuses and arrests (BCO #318-350-2946: Mallet to Lord Curzon of Kedleston, April 22, 1919). At the end of the testimonies, the British legation summarized:

British labourers on the fruit farms were driven to work at the point of the bayonet and with revolvers, . . . two British subjects were murdered by a Police Official and an Overseer, . . . many West Indians were wrongfully imprisoned, . . . West Indian labourers were ejected without proper notice from their camps for which they had paid rent in advance, and lastly, . . . many West Indians had their personal property including money, destroyed and burned by the ruthless and recriminatory actions of the Company's employees and Costa Rican police officials. (BCO #318-350-2946: Murray to Governor of Jamaica, May 29, 1919:1)

They reported that the physical abuse of the workers by the Costa Rican police was "amply borne out by the marks the men carried on their bodies, and which were shown to the Commission during the enquiry" (BCO #318-350-2946: McAdam to Murray, June 5, 1919).

Violence was not limited to police repression. The strikers frequently initiated confrontations when the company imported strike-breakers. A West Indian Company informant who infiltrated into the strike movement portrays in his report to the manager of the Bocas Division the desperation and violence of the workers. The first part of his report is a description of a strike leader's speech:

[He advocated] with unabated fury . . . the shooting of white men with buck shot from guns from behind, the beating of foremen, the chopping down of the Company's young cacao trees, the burning down of the Commissary and camp, the opening of railroad switches, etc. etc.

. . . a large number of these soi-disant strikers . . . armed with sticks marched down to the Company's machine shop, and violently introduced themselves therein, they at once started to throw water on the different engines . . . and also attacking the few men who did not join them and were at work. Later on the same day, about 9 A M a dense crowd, about 400 men again armed with sticks and stones was formed in the railroad track . . . and they were determined not to allow any Company's vehicles to pass through. An attempt at wrenching the rails was made, and it was right there that the Panama Police made the first arrests. About 40 men were taken up. [sic] (BDA: unidentified informant to Blair, April 16, 1920)

This level of violence was confirmed by 114-year-old Mr. Bettel who described to me as if it were the most natural, logical thing to have done, how they used to shoot and beat up strikebreakers: "If you don't strike, the man them that strike would shot ya. Or you can lick them good though—lash them. Get a stick and lash them. You lash them with a stick and throw your first at them—a brutal fight."

Two strikers were killed during the 1918–19 Sixaola District strike, dozens were wounded, and the entire leadership was imprisoned." Nevertheless, under pressure from the British Colonial Office, the com-

pany raised wages by 15 percent and agreed to transfer both the division manager and the superintendent of agriculture to another country. Except for a handful of leaders who were blacklisted, all the striking laborers who had been fired (90 percent of the workforce) were reinstated.

Elderly black survivors from the post-World War I period told me of numerous additional violent work stoppages following the 1918-19 Sixaola District strike, which were not documented in the Costa Rican press. According to Mr. Bettel, repression markedly increased following the events in Sixaola. The subsequent labor confrontations occurred in an atmosphere of veritable terror: "1919, 1920, and 1921. It was hell over there [Bocas Division] I tell you. You could get killed just talking about a strike. The government went in favor of the company." The eyewitness survivors from the labor disturbances of these years in the Bocas Division (three elderly West Indians) agreed that the strikes were failures because they had lacked a union:

How you gonna strike good? You don't have no house, no money. Don't have nothing to eat. It wasn't the whole nation on strike. The company bring in new men and pay twenty cents, thirty cents. The men that strike can't get nothing to eat. Some of them go back to work all the same. But when you have a *sindicato* [union] in the country, the *sindicato* man paying his people. You want sugar you get it, cigarette whatever you want. There is money for you weekly; you pay rent. You don't have to worry about nothing because it's a *sindicato* ban. And [the *sindicato*] feed its own people.

ETHNIC SEGMENTATION

Faced with escalating labor unrest among its West Indian workers, the transnational systematized an ethnically based "divide and conquer" strategy.¹² When the West Indians struck, it imported Hispanic strikebreakers. By the 1920s, wages in the coffee orchards in the Central Highlands of Costa Rica were dropping relative to those paid in the banana industry, and therefore it became easier for the transnational to recruit Hispanics. Consequently, the ethnicity of the labor force began to change. Don Simón Mayorga, one of the few Bribri Amerindians who worked for the company in Talamanca during this period, told me specifically that the company began hiring Hispanics [*castellanos*] in increasing numbers in the Bocas Division to counteract the mounting labor unrest of the West Indians in the early 1920s. The tenor of management-labor relations changed: "We had to shut up 'cause anyone that went on strike would lose his job. The pay was miserable. Before that, when just the blacks were around, huh! They were really tough about things like that. They would stop work over any old issue

and nothing would move. Even the overseer wasn't allowed to enter the farm."

The deep-seated racial animosity between Hispanics and blacks prevented them from developing solidarity; they did not even speak the same language. Documents of labor organizers from the period confirm the existence of a profound antagonism between whites¹³ and blacks (Mora 1980: 718-19). Over thirty years later, in the 1950s, a Costa Rican labor leader active in the 1920s denounced the lack of cross-ethnic solidarity in the old days in a speech he gave to a group of striking banana workers:

The company, to reduce the possibility of serious rebellions, fanned the hatred of whites against blacks and blacks against whites. And with great success. More than once when the exasperated black workers in Limón would rebel white workers willfully offered themselves to break the strike; of course the black workers responded in kind when it was the whites who were protesting working conditions. The company meanwhile was calmly exploiting both groups indiscriminately. . . . [It was] a stupid antagonism, which benefited only the company. (Fallas 1978b: 197)

A letter in 1934 from the secretary general of the Costa Rican Communist party to a local cadre in Limón during a United Fruit Company strike illustrates the seriousness of ethnic conflict to union organizers:¹⁴

The company has been fomenting division between blacks and whites because when the workers are divided they are weaker and they are not able to struggle against the company. Try to move forward and win over with care each day more blacks to our ranks; struggle against the ignorance and the lack of comprehension of many of them. . . . Remember [management] is skillfully manipulating this situation with the blacks to make the whites think that blacks are the enemy. (Manuel Mora to Octavio Bustos Ramal del Bosque, cited in *El Diario de Costa Rica*, Sept. 23, 1934: 7)

Despite its efforts, the Communist party was largely unsuccessful in attracting black support. The schism between blacks and Hispanics was so deeply rooted that a British official referred to it as an inherent characteristic of "tropical peoples" in his report to the Colonial Office: "[There is a] wide gulf between West Indians in general and the native [Hispanic] of the Central American Republics. There appears to be a mutual distrust between them and apparently neither will take the trouble to understand the other" (BCO: McAdam to Murray, April 1919: 11).

Another advantage to the company of the deep-seated Hispanic-black antipathy was that government security forces could more easily mobilize against blacks. The police forces of both Panama and Costa

Rica were primarily composed of Hispanics who had little compunction in violently repressing West Indian immigrant laborers. Once again in an official report on the 1918 strike a British colonial officer described the government violence against strike movements in almost theoretical terms: "The police behaved with that indiscretion that is usual in Spanish American countries. The advent of the police was on each occasion accompanied by the usual roughness and brutality in which the West Indians usually had the worst of it" (BCO #318-350-2946: Murray to Mallet, Feb. 3, 1919). Conversely black laborers had to be selective in the violence they directed against Hispanic strikebreakers for fear of arousing the nationalist ire of the local authorities and risking fierce retaliatory repression. As Mr. Bettel explained: "You can't shoot the Spaniard. If you gonna shoot the Spaniards them, you gonna get the government against you. You can lick them though—lash them good [chuckle]."

Divide-and-conquer tactics of introducing strikebreakers of different ethnic or regional identities had implications beyond crisis periods. Ethnic antagonisms also limited the development of the solidarity indispensable for an effective labor movement during periods of tranquillity. Documents from the turn of the century suggest that management throughout Central America was aware of the importance of ethnic diversity in weakening the labor movement (cf. Davis 1980; Conniff 1985). For example, a chief engineer with the Panama Canal Company stated: "My notion is that we should not attempt to prosecute this work without the introduction of at least three separate nationalities . . . so that none of them will get the idea that they are the only source of supply on the earth" (PCCF #2-E-1: Stevens to Shonts, cited in Conniff 1983: 5).

Within this context of ethnic strife throughout the region, the Limón Division workers in Costa Rica made strides to transcend racist antagonisms in 1920 when they established a cross-ethnic, class-based alliance of organized labor on a national level. The Federation of Limón Workers (primarily composed of black West Indian banana workers) signed a pact with the all-Hispanic General Confederation of Labor in San José. The goal was to promote the "unity of the two races and mutual self-help" (cited in de la Cruz 1983: 115). That same year (1920), however, the unity floundered. The Limón workers declared a general strike to protest the United Fruit Company's mass firings of affiliated members, and to demand a 30 percent wage hike (*ibid.*). The San José-based General Confederation of Labor initially supported the strike and sent economic aid. Despite police repression and additional firings, the strike movement was maintained for over a month. It eventually disin-

tegrated, however, after a border war erupted between Panama and Costa Rica in early 1921. The San José-based national union confederation "called on the strikers to abandon the movement in order to channel all their efforts into the conflict with Panama" (*ibid.* : 117). Ironically, West Indian immigrants had little stake in the outcome of the war as both Costa Rica and Panama denied citizenship to even second-generation blacks born in Central America. In other words, the Hispanic labor movement told West Indian workers to abandon a class-based struggle in order to rally behind nationalism for a country that was too racist to recognize them as citizens.

Significantly, twenty years later in the Bocas Division, black and Hispanic workers were still unable to coordinate even the most basic local labor stoppages. For example, a company official wrote in 1942: "The Hispanic laborers stopped work and refused to continue unless we gave them an increase in the contract price for harvesting. Approximately half of the harvesters on Davao Farm are colored and these men continued working in a half-hearted manner for the rest of the day. However, the following morning they, too, refused to go out, claiming that the Hispanic laborers had threatened them bodily harm if they did continue to work" (BDA: Atwood to Kelley, Dec. 16, 1942).

Informants who had worked in the Bocas Division during World War II confirmed that relations between blacks and Hispanics, who by the mid-1940s were a majority of the labor force, were strained. Workers reminisced about massive drunken Saturday night brawls between black and white laborers. For example, a black bartender insisted on serving black customers before Hispanics at a Saturday night dance. By the end of the ensuing fight, two people had been killed and sixty arrested.¹⁵

Ethnic-nationalist tensions were not limited to black versus Hispanic confrontations; they extended to the internal differentiations among the West Indian laborers themselves. In the Bocas and Limón divisions most workers were from Jamaica but significant numbers came from Barbados, Trinidad, the Leeward Islands (St. Kitts-Nevis, St. Lucia, and Grenada), and the French-speaking colonies of Martinique and Guadeloupe.¹⁶ Major economic differences among the various Caribbean islands at the turn of the century affected the "exploitability" of their emigrant populations. Barbadians, for example, faced a more intense economic crisis than Jamaicans (*cf.* Richardson 1985). The plantation exhibited a clearly defined stratification: Creoles, the descendants of the original African slaves who had mixed with their European owners, were at the apex. They had populated the region before the advent of the transnational. The Trinidadians, who were few in number and

tended to be better educated, were just below the Creoles. Jamaicans were the most numerous group and, by all accounts, considered themselves to be the most "cultured" (cf. Bryce-Laporte with Purcell 1982: 228). The Barbadians and emigrants from St. Kitts ranked distinctly lower in the scale. The Costa Rican press noted this hierarchy in 1910, advising its Hispanic readership that all blacks were not equal: "Those Barbadians bring thievery and pillage; they are much inferior in conduct to the Jamaicans who are always so respectful" (*La Prensa Libre*, Aug. 8, 1910:3).

French-speaking immigrants, especially the Martinicans, occupied the lowest rung in the West Indian national-regional hierarchy. Elderly folk claimed that "the French" engaged in "fishing, gambling, and thieving" rather than plantation work. According to Quince Duncan (n.d.: 13), a Costa Rican of Jamaican descent, the Jamaicans in Port Limón constructed at the turn of the century a separate school in a poorer neighborhood so that their children would not have to mix with those from Martinique, St. Kitts, Barbados, and St. Lucia. Even at the time of my fieldwork in the company's port town of Almirante, the progeny of Martinicans were still relegated to a distinctly lower-prestige neighborhood known as "*Patois town*" or "*barrio Francés*" (cf. McCarthy 1976: 72).

Although the antagonism among the different sectors of the black population was not so profound as the cleavage between blacks and Hispanics, it played a significant role in impeding the development of a class-based labor solidarity. A United Fruit Company foreman from the late 1920s noted, "The Negro from the United States has no use for the British subjects. The Jamaican has no regard for the Black from Belize or Barbadoes, and still less for the French-speaking Negroes and the Blacks from the United States" (cited in Kepner 1936: 169).¹⁸ The company occasionally imported West Indians from different islands to undermine labor movements. The most notable example was the previously mentioned riot in 1910 precipitated by the influx of 700 St. Kitts workers to undermine the incipient Artisans and Labourers Union. During the months before the arrival of the St. Kitts workers, as the union was building strength, the transnational had attempted to intimidate the general labor force by leaking stories to the local newspapers of the imminent arrival of Hispanics to "replace the blacks who are members of the Union," and also of its intent to import 5,000 Barbadians along with "Haitians and Americans to replace the striking Jamaicans" (*La Información*, Aug. 4, 1910:2, Aug. 6, 1910:3; *La Prensa Libre*, Aug. 8, 1910:3). In the particular case of the St. Kitts workers, the

company's strategy failed because the newly arrived laborers refused to accept the work conditions they encountered in Limón, and demanded their repatriation (*El Tiempo*, Nov. 27, 1910). In the midst of the riots provoked by the arrival of the St. Kitts workers, the company imported yet another shipment of West Indians from Martinique (*La Información*, Nov. 27, 1910:3).

The company also took advantage of purely local, community-based differences. For example, the stevedores in Almirante frequently staged work stoppages. The logistics of dock work makes it capable of halting exports from the entire plantation. Work slowdowns on the docks by a relatively small number of individuals, therefore, can cause significant losses to the transnational. To counteract this vulnerability in Bocas del Toro, the company diversified the pool of laborers from which it recruited stevedores, selecting them from among the half-dozen communities scattered along the mainland and on the small islands in Chiriquí Lagoon. Most of these dock workers were also small farmers and were employed only on a casual basis, depending on the company's continually changing shipping schedules (BDA: Adams to Blair, June 17, 1924; Munch to Moore, March 6, 1954). When labor crises erupted on the docks, consequently, the company would juggle the various communities within the Lagoon, one against the other. For example, in 1933 the superintendent in charge of loading in Almirante reported to his superiors his plans for undermining an impending work stoppage: "Aguilar and his companions held a meeting on [the] night of April 5th at which they decided to strike for increased rates or not allow us to load any more boats. These agitators live in their own huts across Cedar Creek in the area known as Chinatown. We plan to weed this gang out and will bring a larger gang from Bocas [Island] to load and hire only such Almirante men as we know to be loyal and quiet" (BDA: Miskell to Marsh, April 7, 1933).

Economic differences in the various communities surrounding Almirante were at the root of the community-level attachments that segmented the dock workers:

We employ 125 men from Bocas who come from the town of Bocas, Old Bank, Nancy's Cay [small island] and Careening Cay, 50% of whom grow fruit and sell it to the company.

We employ from 75 to 100 men from the Lagoon who come to Almirante each week on the launches of the company that gather up their fruit which the company has purchased from them. 90% of these men grow and sell fruit to the company.

We employ 150 men from Almirante and One Mile who, when not work-

ing on the dock, are employed in the Streets & Parks Department and in the Cacao Drying Plant. About 15% of these men grow and sell fruit to the company. (BDA: Adams to Blair, June 17, 1924)

DIFFERENTIAL LABOR QUALITY

The cleavages and hierarchies within the black workforce corresponded to differences in labor quality and exploitability. As one might expect, the Trinidadians were considered the "laziest" workers. They did not come from as desperately poor a background as the rest of the West Indian immigrants, and tended to have higher levels of education. They were concentrated in the "soft" jobs that required literacy skills such as warehouse foremen or dispatchers in the Materials and Supplies Department. The Creoles also held such jobs. An elderly Creole observed: "After having been taught in the English schools with Jamaican teachers, [we] were able to hold important jobs as clerks, book-keepers etc" (Reid 1983: 7). Barbadians and Jamaicans, on the other hand, were renowned for being hard-working manual laborers. Ironically the "French" were "too vice ridden to make good workers." Indeed, the Martinicans and Guadeloupans represented an incipient *lumpenproletariat*. They lacked the language skills and the cultural savvy of the Anglo-Saxon, Caribbean colonial style that North American supervisors demanded from West Indians. Elderly informants insisted that Martinicans and Guadeloupans had "bad characters" and chose to "fish and thieve" instead of working honestly for the transnational.

The "worst" of all the black workers were the black North Americans. They had a reputation for unruliness and a predisposition for labor union organizing. Mr. Bettel, himself a Bahamian, recalled, "Black Americans, huh! The company couldn't manage them. They shot you and don't give a damn. They don't stand for nothing. The company couldn't rob them." Management considered the influence of U.S. blacks in the Bocas Division to be so nefarious that ship captains were warned that they should "quit signing on negro crew at Bocas and bringing them to Mobile [Alabama] or permitting crews from . . . [your] ship to be signed off at Bocas. . . . They . . . [have been] causing unrest among our laborers at Bocas, by reason of injecting labor unionism into their heads by discharging negroes from Mobile . . . at Bocas" (BDA: Ellis to Dimon, Dec. 2, 1919). North American blacks were accustomed to superior working conditions and had more experience in organizing to defend their economic interests: "The continual visiting of . . . negroes in Mobile fills them with exalted ideas, and they return here and spread the news of the excellent conditions under which labor

works around Mobile, and the usual labor agitator propaganda simply increases our difficulties which are already quite enough" (BDA: Blair to Ellis, Nov. 21, 1919).

Similarly, the United Fruit Company considered West Indians who had worked in the Canal Zone, where wages were higher and conditions less rigorous, "absolutely useless hangers-on who will do nothing" (BDA: Blair to Cutter, March 22, 1922). "I can say very little for the laborers we get from the Canal Zone. We got several hundred of them over here in the last two months. . . . They simply will not work, and those who do try get sick and have to be sent to the hospital" (BDA: Blair to Chittenden, Aug. 8, 1922).

The harshness of these judgments is especially significant since the period was immediately following World War II when there were thousands of desperately unemployed West Indians in the Canal Zone. Instead of hiring from this large pool of workers (many of whom were ultimately repatriated) the company preferred to send a labor contractor to Jamaica to recruit peasants directly from the countryside: "I am therefore asking your permission and authority to proceed to Jamaica where I am sure I can do twice as much work, in getting a better selection of hard-working men, within the reach of pay" (BDA: Coombs to Kyes, April 28, 1919).

A few years later, in the mid-1920s, when the company was expanding banana and cacao plantings in the Estrella Valley District in Limón (see map 1), the company once again hired laborers directly from Jamaica despite the large numbers of unemployed Jamaican immigrants already in the region. Jamaicans with several years' experience in plantation work would not accept the wages and working conditions the transnational was offering (Koch 1975:267).¹⁹ They had begun a process of upward mobility in Central America.

SIX / Black Upward Mobility

Dey looks to me laik dey were barberians, laik dey wud kil an' iit piiple, datz di wey dey looks. Deze piiple wur illiterate an' ignorant an' wii wuz ahlweys afreed av dem. If yu goin along de striit an yu si dem yu waak on di odder sa'id. Dey always kiari dier kutlas wid dem.

—Elderly black woman in Limón describing her childhood impressions of Hispanics,
cited in Purcell 1982: 79

For forty long years we Costa Ricans were displaced from the best jobs of the Atlantic Zone by Negroes. They were warehouse supervisors, chiefs of commissaries, clerks and formans [sic]. . . . They think that they are superior to us because they are of pure blood. They look down upon our language.

—Petition by Hispanic banana workers to the Costa Rican National Assembly, cited in
La Tribuna, Jan. 8, 1941

Blacks have achieved upward mobility through (1) land acquisition, (2) emigration, and (3) preferential employment with the company and in the local service sector in the plantation region.¹ From World War II through the 1960s, most blacks engaged in all three processes at some point in their life, depending upon external political economic constraints as well as the phases of maturity in their own life cycle. The trend has been for young blacks to leave agricultural wage work by emigrating or by obtaining preferential employment. Middle-aged blacks acquired prime cacao or banana lands and converted themselves into small "independent" farmers selling bananas or cacao to the transnational. During periods of economic duress these small farmers continued to perform occasional wage work for the company to supplement their incomes. Their children, when they did not emigrate, usually acquired better jobs within the local occupational hierarchy and then took over their parents' farm when they reached middle age. Regardless of the specific pattern followed, the end result has been the emergence of an ethnic occupational hierarchy that contrasts markedly with the pattern prevalent in the rest of the world. "The Atlantic Zone [is] one of the few places in the world where bourgeois Blacks exploit an underprivileged white minority" (Koch 1975: 378).

THE RECONSTITUTION OF THE BLACK PEASANTRY

The first step in the dramatic transformation of the class composition of the original West Indian immigrants was their "reconstitution" into peasants on the margin of the plantations in both Bocas del Toro and Limón. To a certain extent, this trend was forced upon them by the repeated local booms and busts in the banana and cacao industry and by the disruptions in local production patterns caused by worldwide economic crises and international commodity price fluctuations. As was noted in chapter 1, ecological factors also contributed to the banana industry's instability, particularly for the Bocas del Toro Division, which from 1903 onward was the plantation hardest hit by the devastating root fungus appropriately nicknamed the Panama disease.

The company often leased its depleted, infected lands to former workers and then purchased the bananas or cacao that these newly reconstituted peasants were able to squeeze out of the formerly productive farms. Ironically, therefore, disease and the depletion of soil fertility promoted the consolidation of a peasantry.² The statistics show that, prior to the introduction of the disease-resistant varieties of bananas in the 1960s, the older plantations had the highest proportions of purchased bananas to company-produced ones (Kepner and Soothill 1935:272-73).³ This was the case, for example, with the Talamanca and Sixaola districts during the late 1920s through the mid-1930s. Even while the company was opening up the Talamanca District, it maneuvered to encourage "independent" farmers to establish themselves on the less fertile portions of the valley: "There is some land between Chase and Suretka from which we might get fruit in small quantities if we allowed squatters to settle on it" (BDA: Blair to Chittenden, Sept. 30, 1919). Significantly, by 1929, 71 percent of all the bananas exported from the Bocas Division were purchased from small black farmers concentrated in the Talamanca and Sixaola valleys, as well as along the Chiriquí Lagoon (Kepner and Soothill 1935:273).

The transnational's strategy of substituting cacao for bananas on depleted, infected soils also promoted the peasant economy since cacao was only marginally profitable owing to dramatic world price fluctuations, and the company often preferred to commercialize it rather than to produce it. It was worthwhile to the company to maintain direct control over the production of cacao only in those regions where soils were optimal. In Talamanca, for example, the company contented itself with commercializing the crop, whereas it maintained control over the production process in the richer, more accessible lands of the Sixaola District until 1957.⁴

The West Indian migrant laborers who managed to gain independence from the transnational by establishing themselves as small cacao and banana producers in the 1910s and 1920s remained, nevertheless, dependent upon the company. Only the largest growers (most of whom were either Europeans or wealthy Hispanics from the Central Highlands of Costa Rica) had legal contracts with the company guaranteeing them minimum prices and delivery quotas. The absence of a contract was especially a problem for banana producers, since the company would increase the proportion of bananas it rejected on the grounds that they were of poor quality when world market prices were low (cf. Núñez 1976; Trouillot 1988:chap. 7). Furthermore, the company's success in ousting all competitors from both Bocas and Limón eliminated alternative channels for commercializing bananas and cacao. Several historians have described the black banana farmers of the first half of the 1900s as "privileged salaried workers" who had the formal trappings of independence but in practice were proletarians disguised as peasants (cf. Facio 1978:56-57).¹ These "independent" farmers imposed higher levels of self-exploitation upon themselves and their families than the company was able to impose on its own workers. Wage earners who chafe under the direct supervision of a plantation foreman are often willing to superexploit themselves when provided with access to land and the illusion of independence. Of course there was a concrete economic incentive to acquire land as well. On the basis of United States Consular Reports from the turn of the century, anthropologist Charles Koch calculated that small farmers could earn thirty-one cents for every eight cents paid to a common laborer (United States Consular Reports #294: 1905:59-61, cited in Koch 1975:273).

Another dynamic encouraging the conversion of the West Indians into peasants was the continued part-time work of most black farmers on the plantation. This arrangement proved profitable for management. Plantation wages could be lowered because a large proportion of the labor force supplemented its wage income with peasant production (both subsistence and commodity). In fact, the majority of the West Indian banana workers at the turn of the century were obliged at the same time to be part-time peasants in order to survive. They had to maintain one foot in the peasant subsistence-commodity economy and the other in the wage labor sector. The parallel peasant economy subsidized wage rates in the plantation sector, a classic Third World phenomenon (cf. Wallerstein 1977). Minor Keith had taken advantage of this dynamic in Limón as early as 1878 when he temporarily suspended the construction of the Atlantic Coast portion of the Costa Rican interoceanic railroad because of financial difficulties. He kept his labor force from starv-

ing or emigrating by arranging for the Costa Rican government to provide his unemployed workers with land upon which to cultivate subsistence crops (Koch 1975: 80).

Koch (1975: 123) argues that it was these unemployed West Indian railroad construction workers who originated the banana industry in Costa Rica. They began growing bananas for sale to those merchant ships docking in Limón which were experimenting with banana imports to the United States. The same was true in Bocas during the 1860s and the 1890s when significant numbers of West Indians migrated to the Chiriquí Lagoon area after the completion of the Panamanian inter-oceanic railroad in the 1850s and after the bankruptcy of the French Panama canal project in the 1880s. During this period before the founding of the United Fruit Company more bananas were exported from Bocas del Toro than from Limón (Koch 1975: 123). It was not until 1904 that the United Fruit Company managed to assert its monopoly control over the private companies that purchased fruit from these small West Indian peasant producers in Chiriquí Lagoon (see chapter 2).

Even as the transnational expanded its operations and increased its direct control over the production process in Bocas del Toro at the turn of the century, it continued to allow, if not encourage, its laborers to maintain small plots of subsistence root crops (yams, cassava, ñampí). A significant proportion of the workers also sold bananas and cacao to the company in their "leisure" time. Their extra income considerably reduced pressures for higher wages. The Bocas manager in 1919 countered the complaint of the British consul that wages were too low on the plantation by noting: "As none of our laborers work full time they have plenty of leisure to devote to a garden . . . without in any way diminishing their earnings in money. They probably average two-thirds of their time at work" (BFO #371-3856-2850: Blair to Murray, June 11, 1919). Significantly, thirty-seven years later, in 1956, the manager of the same plantation responded to the identical complaint from an inspector of the Ministry of Labor with the same rationale: "The complaint that the workers on the cacao farms are not earning the minimum salary is a regular one as you know. This labor does not as a rule work a full day. . . . A number of the workers are women who break cacao and work only a few hours a day at this task. A number of the laborers work their own patches [plots] . . . part time and work part time for the Company" (BDA: Munch to Hamer, Jan. 3, 1956).

In addition to underwriting the maintenance costs of a laborer, these private patches also increased the stability of the labor force. For example, in an analysis of the factors contributing to labor quality, the superintendent of agriculture of the Bocas Division specifically noted:

"The best class of workers are those that have steady employment and reside on a little farm on which they produce fruit to sell to the company" (BDA: Adams to Blair, June 17, 1924). Workers with private farms tended to be older and to be the heads of larger households. They had more economic and personal responsibilities and, above all, they were more cautious in their actions; they could not afford to lose their source of supplemental income should there be a strike or should the company fire them.

At times, however, subsistence production represented a threat to the transnational's ability to control its labor force. For example, in 1924 when there was a labor shortage in Limón due to the expansion of operations in the Estrella Valley District, the company adopted a hard line against its former laborers who were squatting on abandoned land. It began charging back rents and pressuring the government to evict illegal tenants (Koch 1975: 165). The evicted peasants, of course, swelled the labor pool available for employment in the Estrella Valley District. Similarly, according to elderly informants, at the height of expansion in the Talamanca and Sixaola districts (1910s-20s) the company allowed its workers to plant food crops but not cash crops on their private plots. In this manner, the company ensured that its laborers fed themselves without becoming so economically self-sufficient that they might be able to withdraw from the labor market. More dramatically, in periods of labor confrontation the company actually forbade its workers to cultivate their subsistence plots. For example, during the 1918-19 Sixaola District strike the company went so far as to "root up and burn" the subsistence plots of vegetables and fruits of the workforce (BCO #319-350-2976: Murray to Mallet, Feb. 23, 1919). The company's goal, according to survivors from this strike, was to starve the workers into submission.

Another cost subsidized by the half-peasant, or semiproletarian, composition of the labor force was retirement payments to elderly workers. By the 1940s, there was a large superannuated population in the Bocas Division and on its periphery. From the mid-1930s through the 1950s, company correspondence abounds with references to its "old and feeble" workers (BDA: Miskell to Chittenden, Jan. 22, 1935). By the 1950s, Panamanian labor law obliged the transnational to provide retired workers with a token pension of fifteen dollars per month. Most elderly in the region, however, did not qualify for even this minimal pension. They had "incomplete service records," having alternated between peasant commodity production and wage work because of the instability of the banana industry.

The case of Mr. Broadbell is illustrative. His dilemma, amply docu-

mented in the company's historical archives, shows the pathos of the immigrant experience of the first generation of West Indian expatriates: after a lifetime of hard labor on the plantations in Central America, he was left with nothing, not even a homeland:

Mr. Broadbell left St. Kitts in 1910 for Costa Rica and from that country was contracted to work for the Company in Panama in 1912. He finished working for the Company in 1952.

As he claims that he was contracted by the Company to work in Central America, Mr. Broadbell would like to be sent back to his home by the Company as soon as possible. (BDA: Sharman-Golding to Gronbladt, Feb. 13, 1960)

Two years after Mr. Broadbell's repatriation, the company received a letter from a minister in St. Kitts:

[Mr. Broadbell] was recruited to work in Panama from St. Kitts as a youth and it would appear that the United Fruit Company and its successor might consider a more generous remuneration for his very long years of service. He is now old and increasingly infirm, all his family has died out and he tries to feed himself making baskets. If the \$150 which he received is the bonus paid by the Company I would make a plea that some further *ex gratia* payment might be made to so old an employee or a small pension be granted. His need is very genuine and I would urge the Company to show compassion in this case. (BDA: Reverend Walker to King, July 5, 1963)

The company, however, responded negatively on the grounds that "the broken service record of Mr. Broadbell did not entitle him to the pension stipulated by law. Mr. Broadbell was repatriated to St. Kitts at his own request. . . . It is regretted, under the circumstances, that we are unable to assist him further" (BDA: King to Reverend Walker, July 22, 1963). Ironically, Mr. Broadbell was probably one of the 700 St. Kitts men imported by the company to undermine the Artisans and Labourers Union in 1910 (see chapter 5). He was evidently subsequently recruited from Limón to work in the Bocas Division when the transnational began to open the Sixaola and Talamanca districts in the early 1910s. When the Talamanca District was abandoned in the late 1920s, he probably established himself as a squatter, growing cacao and bananas on a small plot while intermittently performing wage work for the company during periods of economic crisis. Once he was too old to work, the best solution from the transnational's perspective was to repatriate him.

Broadbell's case is but one of hundreds (if not thousands) typical of turn-of-the-century West Indian immigrant laborers. The company files on retirement benefits are full of rejection notices sent to former

West Indian laborers because of their "broken service records." The Medical Department's historical archives testify eloquently to the human suffering involved: "Benjamin Johnson 63 years old, Jamaican laborer at R.F.C. 2, is unable to perform heavy manual labor because of hypertension and heart failure. Repatriation . . . is recommended" (BDA: Dr. Engler to Chase, June 24, 1953). "Adolphus Goodridge, 70 years, Barbados . . . suffers from general weakness, senility, . . . deafness and is permanently incapacitated" (BDA: Dr. Engler to Alvarado, Nov. 10, 1956).

Although land acquisition by blacks was beneficial in many respects to the transnational, it should not be viewed in strictly functionalist terms as in the interests of the company. Indeed, for the most part, land acquisition represented a desperate struggle by underpaid workers to obtain security and independence from the transnational. Indeed, there is a tradition particularly strong in the West Indies of plantation workers desperately converting themselves into peasants at the first available opportunity: "Like blades of grass pushing up between the bricks, the peasants of the Caribbean have been embattled since their beginnings" (Mintz 1985: 131).

Since there was no social security or pension plan, the only way for banana workers to provide for old age was to carve out a private plot from the jungle before their stamina and strength waned. A field researcher during the 1930s specifically noted that middle-aged banana workers invested their wage earnings in clearing private farms (cited in Bryce-Laporte 1968: 127). Ironically, this desperate striving for old-age security subsequently allowed the company to refuse on legal grounds to pay retirement pensions to laborers with "broken service records."

Anthropologists and historians have tended to exaggerate the facility with which blacks obtained land in the Bocas-Limón region before World War II (cf. Murillo and Hernandez 1981; Koch 1975). As in the case of the forgotten West Indian immigrant labor movement, this exaggeration is partially because second-generation, upwardly mobile black landowners want to distinguish themselves from the low-prestige, landless Hispanic laborers who have recently immigrated and who squat "illegally" on uncultivated land (see chapter 4, note 13). A more careful examination of the written documentation and archival sources, however, reveals that bitter land struggles took place from the early 1900s through the 1950s. Local newspapers and the Costa Rican congressional record from the 1910s are replete with accounts of land conflicts (cf. *Times*, June 13, 1912: 3; ANCH #11466: "Delegation of Guacimo to Deputies of Congress," July 28, 1915: 1). The files of the Bocas Division under the heading "Sixaola Squatters" contain hun-

dreds of pages of legal correspondence. As early as 1913 there were violent confrontations between the company and West Indian land invaders; in 1918, for example, the Costa Rican police were called into the lower Sixaola Valley to eject West Indian squatters (BDA: Loose papers, "Sixaola Squatters File").

As was noted in the discussion of Bribri resistance to the transnational's appropriation of their land in chapter 3, it was the West Indian settlers in the Talamanca Valley who led the struggle for Amerindian land rights. For example, almost all the names on a 1920 list of 188 squatters in the Sixaola and Talamanca districts are British, indicating that by that date most of the company's land conflicts were with West Indians⁶ rather than with Amerindians (BDA: assistant manager to Cutter, Feb. 18, 1920). The division manager specifically noted this fact in a 1920 report to his superior: "The people who are giving us trouble here [Talamanca] are nearly all Jamaicans and outsiders who have located on our land" (BDA: Blair to Chittenden, Feb. 19, 1920).

In other words, contrary to contemporary stereotypes, black banana workers in Costa Rica and Panama struggled, often militantly, to obtain their land. Land acquisition was a contradictory process; at the same time that it was an economic necessity for the workers encouraged as a ploy by the transnational to lower wages, it also represented a determined political movement for independence from wage work. There is a parallel between the myth of the black farmer who peacefully obtained land and that of the black laborer who was "inherently passive and respectful of authority." Ironically, as will be shown in chapter 7, land acquisition ultimately demobilized the black population politically.

EMERGENCE OF A NEW OCCUPATIONAL HIERARCHY

Although many blacks became farmers out of desperation (old age, starvation wages, instability of the local banana industry, etc.), the long-term effect of land acquisition was to provide them with an alternative source of income. It enabled them to shun the lower-prestige tasks on the plantation. Ironically, therefore, the same dynamic that lowered wages by providing a subsistence subsidy to the labor force enabled blacks to leave agricultural day labor employment. Veteran black banana workers with access to land no longer had to accept the same levels of exploitation that starving, landless, newly arrived immigrant laborers were obliged to tolerate. Once they had a plot of land available to feed them, they could refuse to perform the most strenuous unpleasant tasks on the plantation. In fact, depending upon the rhythms of the international export economy, their plots often provided them with a cash

income superior to what they could earn as wage laborers. Hispanics, on the other hand, were increasingly willing to emigrate to the lowlands as wages on the coffee haciendas in the Central Highlands of Costa Rica dropped relative to those in the banana industry (Taylor 1980). Those Hispanic immigrants who arrived in Limón tended to be the most desperate of the dispossessed Hispanic peasantry, composed primarily of Nicaraguans and Guanacastecans fleeing the unemployment and land usurpation caused by the consolidation of the cattle industry (see chapter 13).

Consequently, as early as the 1920s a new class/ethnic hierarchy began to emerge in Bocas del Toro and Limón. By the 1920s, blacks were already refusing the wages that newly arrived landless Hispanic immigrants accepted (Koch 1975:276). As early as 1912, a North American visitor reported that black stevedores on the banana-loading dock in the port of Limón received 15 cents per hour compared to 12.5 paid to Hispanics, and that they also dominated the less strenuous tasks in the loading process (Putnam 1914:170, cited in Koch 1975:324). Since West Indians were the original population group on the plantation, having arrived at the turn of the century, they had the first pick of the better menial jobs. By the time Hispanics began entering the plantation labor force in large numbers, blacks had already had time to obtain experience and build up local contacts, giving them leverage for better jobs and an awareness of their economic alternatives.

According to elderly informants an ethnically based division of labor had emerged by the 1920s. Most notably, the task of clearing virgin jungle and heavy underbrush in the cacao groves had become "Latin work." The more technical tasks, which required experience and were less strenuous, such as harvesting and pruning cacao or bananas, were "black work": "The blacks never never worked in the hard jobs. They worked, yes, especially some of the very young ones but more in either harvesting bananas or harvesting cacao. They were always looking for their independence, to have their very own little farm, their little plot of yams and sugar cane. The most they did was harvest cacao." Since most West Indians had developed expertise from years of practice at these tasks, they were usually paid on a piece-rate basis and could earn considerably higher wages than the inexperienced new Hispanic immigrants. An elderly West Indian claimed that management had good reason to promote blacks to the more technical tasks: "There was a certain class of work the Spaniards didn't understand. Spaniards didn't know to cut bananas. They break the [large] bunches. Most of the Jamaicans learn from their parents. Most have bananas at home. The Jamaicans in all the nations that come to Costa Rica, they ahead in cultivations be-

cause they learn from home. That's why Minor Keith bring the Jamaicans. No trouble with them."

This occupational hierarchy became increasingly rigid in the 1930s and 1940s as larger numbers of impoverished Hispanics migrated to the lowlands while more and more blacks abandoned direct company employment in favor of private farming. Elderly plantation residents differentiated between those tasks which had been "for whites" and those "for blacks" thirty years earlier. Even marginal differences in job category were reflected in the local ranking system. For example, during World War II and the 1950s blacks dominated the construction crews for new housing, considered a softer job than toiling in the fields.

Ironically, the economic decline of both the Bocas and the Limón divisions (in the 1930s and 1920s respectively) accelerated black upward mobility in the local occupational hierarchy because the transnational could pay blacks considerably lower wages than white North Americans. Consequently it began replacing white North Americans with blacks in the middle-level skilled tasks. The first such replacement occurred in the Railroad Department following repeated strikes and labor disturbances by the North American "booze fighting Tropical Tramps" who traditionally had been the conductors and enginemen on United Fruit Company plantations (BDA: Marsh to Chittenden, June 17, 1918). In the Limón Division there was a larger percentage of Hispanics working in the Railroad Department, but according to calculations made by Koch (1975:317-20, 331, citing files of the Northern Railroad Company), blacks in the 1920s averaged higher wages than Hispanics and occupied the more prestigious positions. By the mid-1940s, therefore, almost all the Bocas Division's train engineers, conductors, stokers, mechanics, and bridge repairmen were black. Repeatedly elderly Hispanics told me with marked resentment that "in the old days blacks ran all the machinery."

The company also relegated the low-prestige white-collar jobs to blacks. For example, all the workers in the Materials and Supplies Department and the Commissary Department (which maintained a network of stores on all the farms operated by the transnational) were black. Even low-level management positions were given preferentially to blacks; for example, in 1948 all twelve of the foremen on the Sixaola District cacao farms were West Indians.

In addition to speaking English, blacks had significantly higher levels of literacy than the immigrant Hispanics. For example, as early as 1883 the illiteracy rate in Limón Province was only 21.3 percent compared to 41.3 for the rest of Costa Rica (Vargas and Requeyra 1983:68). An eighty-two-year-old Jamaican in the old-age home of Limón who

had worked in the Talamanca and Estrella Valley districts in the 1920s and 1930s explained to me, "In my boy days the Spaniards in the country, you find they are more dumb. Lots of them can't even sign their name. You see a little Spanish boy carrying a big machete following his father to the bush and when his father die he take his place and he can't even sign his name. Those days aback you don't find much school. The most schools you find is the English school. I never meet a Jamaican that cannot sign his name." The black Panamanian sociologist Raymond Davis identifies a "cultural factor" in the favoritism North American supervisors showed black laborers who had been socialized, often for several generations, in the plantation setting: "The British and American cultural attributes of the second generation gave them an adaptive capacity which exceeded that of the Spanish-speaking Panamanians" (1982: 152). "Black Anglo-Saxons had greater cultural compatibility with the Americans" (*ibid.*: 77; see also Knapp and Knapp 1984: 163-67).

West Indians had "learned how to act" around their white bosses. An elderly black former commissary explained to me: "The American knew how far he could push the colored man, but the Spaniards them! They are very treacherous. When you least expect it they cut your head off." Blacks, consequently, were assigned in large numbers to office and domestic positions that required extensive personal contact with management. By contrast, most Hispanic immigrants were young former peasants or even impoverished city dwellers working as agricultural day laborers for the first time in their lives. An elderly Hispanic from Limón confided to me with embarrassment, "You have to understand, we must have looked like savages to the blacks. We had a lower cultural level. Most of us were young and looking for adventure. We'd be drinking and carrying on whenever we wanted to."

The numerous racist petitions during the interwar period document the pervasiveness of the ethnic occupational hierarchy. They protested the discrimination of the United Fruit Company against whites in favor of blacks. "There exists a system of definite inferiority for the white race to which we belong and of privilege favoring that [black] race" (ANCH #16753, 1933: 83, cited in Fernández 1973: 172; see also epigraph at the beginning of the chapter). Similarly a British consular report noted: "The West Indians are . . . not popular with the Panamanians, the principal reason being that they are selected by employers for most kinds of labour in preference to the Panamanians themselves" (BFO #371-9580: Annual Report of Panama and the Canal Zone, 1923).

The bulk of the black population eventually left plantation employment completely to become full-time cacao farmers. With the rise in

cacao prices on the world market in the mid-1950s, formerly struggling small black farmer/squatters became comfortable landowners. Since they were the first settlers in the region they generally occupied the choicest lands closest to transport infrastructure. The influx of landless Hispanic immigrants provided them a plentiful supply of inexpensive agricultural day labor. Koch (1975: 344) refers to blacks in Limón as a "Kulak class." Indeed, anthropologists who have conducted fieldwork in rural communities in Limón report that blacks owned the superior, flat, alluvial lands devoted to cacao, whereas the more recently settled Hispanics occupied the more marginal (steeper and less fertile) soils and planted basic grains in crop-fallow rotation cycles (cf. Koch 1975: 378, 196; Bryce-Laporte 1962: 127). Eighty-three out of a list of eighty-eight of the biggest cacao suppliers to the company in 1952 in Bocas del Toro had identifiably British last names, indicating West Indian descent (BDA: "Lessors of Company land receiving payment for cacao deliveries," March 20, 1952).

The phenomenon of the successful black cacao farmer living side by side with impoverished Hispanic semiproletarians was most pronounced from the late 1950s through the mid-1970s throughout the plantation periphery in the Bocas-Limón region and expressed itself in a rigidly defined occupational hierarchy. Anthropologists who have conducted fieldwork in the area unanimously report that blacks shunned agricultural wage labor.⁷ For example, "the category of Black peon is almost an empty one. . . . It is only in extremely rare cases that one finds a Black rural dweller who does not have access to some land, whether his own bought land or land inherited from a close kin. Most unskilled agricultural jobs are filled by Hispanics" (Purcell 1982: 145). One fieldworker in a small village in Limón in 1968 reported, "The only three negroes who did work as peons were considered mentally defective and were treated as isolates by the entire community" (Moock 1972: 9). In this same community, the most powerful individuals (the three cacao merchants) were blacks (ibid.: 10). During my fieldwork, it was not uncommon to see young black cacao farmers in their early twenties supervising middle-aged Hispanic day laborers cutting away underbrush in their orchards.

Although for the most part comfortable economically, blacks never emerged as the highest stratum of a capitalist elite in the Bocas-Limón region. Even at the height of their involvement in the cacao industry in the 1960s, black farms were never large-scale, efficiently administered agro-industrial complexes oriented toward accumulating capital. The largest landholdings and the more profitable rural enterprises have always been owned by Hispanic or North American absentee landlords.

Black farmers represented a middle-level local elite operating relatively diversified small- or medium-sized farms. Of course, at the local level this position translates into real political power. For example, Koch noted in the early 1970s that "Negroes were over-represented in provincial and municipal political posts" (1975:44).

An ideological legitimization has emerged around the occupational hierarchy prevalent in Bocas and Limón. It has been said, for example, that Hispanics are naturally inclined to heavy physical labor: "Whites like to chop bush." Black landowners employing Hispanic migrant laborers ascribed to racist constructs typical of landowners anywhere in the world who employ landless day laborers of a different ethnic group. On several occasions I was told that "whites are treacherous, lazy, shiftless drunkards" with "nomadic tendencies."⁸ I was even told that "whites smell bad," and I was warned that they had "cooties [*piojos*]" in their hair. In a patronizing tone a black cacao farmer explained to me that he was careful never to pay his white workers on Saturday evening lest they spend all their money on liquor before Sunday morning.

Even blacks who worked side by side with Hispanics as day laborers "regarded themselves as superior to Hispanics . . . in very explicit terms" (Purcell 1982:76; see also Somarriba 1983:29-30).⁹ For example, a young man who worked in a packing plant in the Bocas Division confided to me, "Perhaps what I am going to say is very bad and false, but it seems to me that the Guanacastecos are less civilized." He then proceeded to describe how violent they were, how they beat their wives, and how they drank excessively and shouted "like savages" in the middle of the night.

EMIGRATION

Emigration has played a key role in accentuating the visibility of black upward mobility. The poorest working-class cohort of the West Indian labor force has emigrated out of the Bocas-Limon region during periods of economic crisis. According to Koch (1975:378, 385) the racist immigration laws and the restrictions on black employment outside the Atlantic lowlands acted as a "one-way valve" during the boom-and-bust cycles of the banana industry and "pumped working class Negroes out of the region . . . [leaving behind a] rump of well-to-do peasants and old people concentrated in the best cacao districts." Those blacks who stayed behind during the economic crises when employment on the plantation was no longer available squatted on uncultivated lands and established themselves as subsistence farmers. During subsequent economic booms, blacks seeking wage employment were not permitted to

reenter the region because of discriminatory immigration laws in both Panama and Costa Rica (Executive Decree #4, April 26, 1942, cited in Beirute 1977: 153-54; *La Tribuna*, April 10, 1934, cited in Purcell 1982: 89). Those who remained behind, however, were able to convert their subsistence plots into cash-earning enterprises (cacao or banana farms) once the economy improved.

Nevertheless, the transition to permanent cash crop farming for those blacks who stayed in Bocas and Limón during the economic crises was not an easy one. They suffered abject poverty, and most chose to flee the economically devastated plantation region (cf. Fallas 1978a: 27, 134). Between 1927 and 1950, according to national census tabulations, the Costa Rican black population fell from 18,003 to 13,749 (cited in Casey 1979: 239). Of course, this was not the first massive relocation of black workers escaping from economic depression in Costa Rica or Panama. For example, as early as 1913 when the company reduced operations in the Guapiles District (see map 1) because of soil exhaustion (Koch 1975: 243), newspapers ran headlines on the high rates of out-migration (cf. *Times*, June 14, 1913).

Although propelled by poverty, emigrants from the Limón and Bocas divisions during World War II tended ultimately to be upwardly mobile. Most blacks left for the Panama Canal where wages were two to three times higher than in Bocas or Limón (BDA: Munch to Chittenden, July 16, 1941). From 1940 through mid-1941 alone, 4,399 people left Bocas del Toro for the Canal Zone (BDA: Kelley to Munch, July 17, 1941).¹⁰ Company files from this period are full of complaints over the dramatic exodus of laborers; for example, "all our best carpenters, all our best common railway labor and practically all our good farm laborers have gone" (ibid.).

The most upwardly mobile jump a black banana worker could make during World War II was to emigrate all the way to the United States. The same factors that enabled West Indians to obtain preferential employment with the transnationals (ability to speak English, accommodation to North American racism, and extensive personal networks) also helped them reach the United States. Many Central American blacks joined the U.S. Army in order to obtain North American citizenship. Some of these emigrants eventually returned to Bocas or Limón, investing their dollars in land, a house, or even a business. The vast majority, however, left permanently, sometimes sending back remittances to elderly family members who remained behind.¹¹ Emigration to the United States was so commonplace in the 1940s through the 1960s that today it is difficult to meet a black Central American who does not have close family members living in the United States.¹²

By the mid-1970s the tendency for the younger generation of blacks in the Bocas-Limón region to emigrate dramatically changed the rural class structure. The "rump of well-to-do" black cacao farmers noted by Koch in the early 1970s was disappearing at the time of my fieldwork. During the 1960s, cacao farmers were able to send their children to high school and even to college. Most of this new generation of educated blacks (many of whom are now professionals) chose not to return to the agricultural way of life.¹ Cacao farming was not considered a satisfactory life style to college graduates, no matter how successful it may have appeared by local rural standards. Young blacks, consequently, have been leaving their parents' farms and going to Port Limón, San José, Panama City, or even New York City where they find better opportunities for economic advancement. Indeed, the reason one sees so few blacks performing heavy agricultural labor in the Bocas-Limón region today is that most young blacks have emigrated.

Significantly, the cacao farmers themselves encouraged their children to leave the agricultural sector. Black parents, even those of the humblest class backgrounds, infused their children with upwardly mobile aspirations. The emphasis was on getting not only out of wage work but also out of agriculture per se and into the big cities (cf. Purcell 1982: 122; Moock 1972: 26). They associated farming with low status. "It is considered ungentlemanly to chop bush" even on one's own land.

Upwardly mobile aspirations that denigrated agriculture existed among the black population even in the 1920s. An elderly black who had successfully made the transition out of the agricultural sector and became the biggest merchant in the Sixaola Valley provides a good example of this attitude: "My mother was the real sparkplug in the family. One night I had a dream that my brother was promoted to commissarian. And my mother said 'well God will help you my son that your dream will be true because there is no future for a young man here in this little town except turning in the bushes [agricultural labor]. Once you put your head in the bushes who is going to know you boys to help you?' So said so done. My brother was promoted."

Today, differences in occupational ambitions between Hispanics and blacks are easily discernible. Anthropologist Trevor Purcell reports that most black parents in Limón told him that they wanted "something better than agriculture" for their children, whereas Hispanic parents said they hoped their children would follow them into agriculture (1982: 122). Similarly in the late 1960s, most black children answered a questionnaire on career goals with the statement that they hoped to "get ahead," whereas most Hispanics responded that they wanted to "defend themselves" (Moock 1972: 26).

One of the results of the flight of young blacks from the rural sector has been the decay of black-owned cacao orchards. The Costa Rican anthropologists, Carmen Murillo and Omar Hernández, who studied cacao producers in Limón during 1980, noted that black-owned farms on the average were older and smaller, received fewer inputs, and were more diversified than Hispanic-owned holdings (1981:151). Black farmers tended to be elderly and physically on the decline. Over the past fifteen years the pattern has been for black rural dwellers to sell their holdings to Hispanic immigrants and to either emigrate or "die out" (Duncan and Meléndez 1981:244-45).

The reduction of black participation in the cacao industry has been accelerated by a devastating fungus known as moniliasis, which has destroyed approximately two-thirds of the cacao harvest since late 1978 (Murillo and Hernández 1981:75). A number of blacks who have been unable, or have chosen not, to emigrate have been forced back into agricultural wage work. Nevertheless blacks have continued to enjoy an above-average economic status, superior to that of most Hispanics in the countryside. For example, during my fieldwork, the most successful rural cooperative operating in Talamanca on the edge of the plantation, dominated by middle-sized black farms, had successfully diversified its production following the cacao debacle. In fact, the regional ethnic occupational hierarchy was clearly reproduced on the cooperative: all the menial laborers in the cooperative's packing plants were Hispanics whereas the highest administrative officers were blacks.

Even in the urban centers closest to the plantation (Port Limón and Almirante), where there have been extremely high levels of unemployment (23 percent in Limón in 1981), blacks have continued to occupy a slightly higher socioeconomic niche than most Hispanics (Vargas and Requeyra 1983:43). According to a 1980 survey 30.5 percent of black workers held white-collar jobs in Port Limón compared to 21.1 percent of Hispanics (ibid.:113). Although some anthropologists have claimed that the upward mobility of blacks in Limón has been exaggerated (Purcell 1982:242), at the time of my fieldwork blacks for the most part distinctly shunned the low-prestige jobs. Even though both Port Limón and Almirante had a significant sector of working-class and *lumpenproletarian* blacks, the street sweepers, the construction workers, and the shoe shiners were almost invariably Hispanic rather than black. Blacks have been able to manipulate to their advantage a local patron-client brokerage system that affords them access to preferential employment, especially in the public sector. When one enters a government office in Limón, for example, the orderly sweeping the floor and emptying the garbage is almost always a dark complexioned Hispanic; the

clerk in charge of photocopying (an especially soft task) is usually a young black; the secretarial and middle-level positions are occupied by both blacks and Hispanics; but the top-level administrator is, of course, a light-skinned Hispanic from San José.

The younger blacks who chose to remain in the rural villages usually hired Hispanics to work in their cacao groves while they attended to more profitable commercial alternatives such as lobster fishing, administering bars, selling marijuana to tourists, working for the government, or living off of remittances from kin in the United States. Blacks conspicuously dominated government jobs in the rural sector. For example, six out of the eleven rural policemen (equivalent to a sheriff in the United States) in the Sixaola District were black as was the local representative of the Ministry of Immigration at the Sixaola Bridge. Similarly, on the Panamanian side of the Sixaola Bridge, four out of seven of the border officials were black; both representatives of the Ministry of Labor to the region were black, and the head of the office was of mixed black/Hispanic descent.¹⁴ The owner of almost all the liquor patents in the Sixaola Valley, one of the richest men in the plantation region, was also of West Indian descent.¹⁵

BLACKS REMAINING ON THE PLANTATION

Those blacks who have remained on the plantation generally worked in semiskilled jobs as low-level supervisors, or in the softer unskilled tasks. Hispanics have nicknamed blacks *la rosca* [the groove of the screw] because they were so "tight with management." This status was clearly visible in the overrepresentation of blacks in the "better" jobs. They were most heavily concentrated in the Electricity Department, the Transport Department, the Materials and Supplies Department, the Engineering Department, the Railroad Department, the Maintenance and Engineering Department, and the paymaster's crews.¹⁶ At the time of my fieldwork, although the head of the Engineering Department was a Hispanic from the capital, the next three in the hierarchy were blacks. Five out of eight of the mechanics who repaired the machines that hauled banana stems from the farms were black. The supervisor of the bridge repair crew was black whereas almost all his workers were Guaymí. Few blacks worked on the five privately owned banana farms, where wages were lower, and none of them held unskilled positions; the four tractor drivers and one labor relations administrator were black. Similarly, none of the blacks employed in the cardboard box factory worked in production. They were all either mechanics, supervisors, or watchmen.

At the same time, however, a significant minority of blacks worked as common laborers for the transnational, especially on the Costa Rican side of the Bocas Division. Many young black plantation workers told me the ravages of "monilia" on their parents' cacao orchards had forced them into wage work on the banana plantation. These black agricultural laborers, however, often had exceptional backgrounds. For example, one young black working in the packing plant had only recently been divorced from his wife and was forbidden access to her cacao orchard; another was a recent immigrant from Jamaica who did not speak Spanish fluently but had already acquired a plot of uncultivated land and intended to abandon wage work as soon as financially feasible. Finally, a large number of blacks working at menial tasks were women because they had fewer alternative sources of income and could not emigrate as easily as men.¹⁷

These black laborers, however, never surpassed 5 percent of the unskilled labor force on the plantation at the time of my fieldwork, and they almost always worked in the packing plants rather than in the fields under the rain and the sun. Furthermore, they were concentrated in the more centrally located packing plants, nearer to the stores and services of the local municipal capital on the plantation in Changuinola (see map 2).

The largest single concentration of black workers was in the port of Almirante among the dock workers and stevedores. Dock work is strenuous, but it was better paid than farm work. It had the advantage, as a young black dock worker explained to me, of being "out of the rain and sun" and "away from the snakes and mud." A close examination of the distribution of jobs among the dock workers, revealed that, once again, blacks, especially elderly blacks, dominated the softer tasks, such as the task of curving (*curvear*), which involved standing at a curve along the loading machine to make sure that no boxes of bananas fell as they advanced on the rollers. Similarly, the worker who sat next to the power switch in order to shut off the electricity in case of an emergency was almost invariably black.

Access to alternative sources of income enabled blacks to avoid menial tasks on the plantation. Although I was unable to obtain hard census data to prove it, I estimated that blacks shunned agricultural wage work only marginally more than their Hispanic equivalents who were born and raised in the plantation vicinity and who also had access to land or preferential employment through seniority and contacts. In fact, through life history interviews I found that many young blacks had experimented with menial company work but found the conditions unsatisfactory compared to their alternatives. The only difference be-

tween blacks and other local residents (Bribri and Hispanic) was that they expressed their distaste for plantation wage work more vocally. They justified their rejection of day labor in specifically ethnic terms: "I'm nobody's slave anymore. Let the Spaniards do that class of work. It's their turn now." Blacks also exaggerated how few of their ethnic group worked on the plantation. On several occasions when I explained my research topic, they warned me not to "write in my book" that blacks worked in bananas: "You may think you see blacks working for the company but they're not black blacks, they're Guanacastecos." Similarly, several times blacks in low-level supervisory positions pointed out phenotypically dark-skinned individuals performing menial tasks and whispered in my ear that those people were not really blacks: "He's of black color but not of black race [*Es de color negro pero no de raza*]."

The closest approximation to an "ethnic explanation" for why blacks avoided wage work in the unskilled jobs on the plantation is that they were frequently subjected to racism by Hispanic supervisors. On numerous occasions blacks told me that they had left company employment after fighting with a supervisor for calling them a derogatory name.¹⁸

SEVEN / Ideological Framework of the Black Experience

To the
Beloved and Scattered Millions of the Negro Race
Greeting

The UNIA and African Communities (Imperial) League, an organization embracing the millions of men, women and children of Negro blood and of African descent of all countries of the world, striving for the FREEDOM, MANHOOD, and NATIONALISM of the Negro, and to hand down to posterity a FLAG OF EMPIRE—to restore to them the old Ethiopian nation one and Indivisible out of which shall come our princes and rulers—to bequeath to our children and our Grand Old Race the heritage of an Ancestry worthy of their time and thoughtful of the future.

—Cover of the Universal Negro Improvement Association membership card in Limón and Bocas del Toro, early 1920s

Ideological domination is, in practice, inseparable from economic and class exploitation. Ideological and economic processes conflate to create the experience of oppression. Nevertheless, to better understand the black experience in Bocas del Toro and Limón I separate out ethnic discrimination from strictly economic processes in order to provide it with the privileged analysis that it fails to receive in most political economy class approaches. Of course, in “real” social life class and ideology are inextricably intertwined, and in the second half of this chapter I discuss the political and organizational responses by the black population to upward economic mobility and ethnic discrimination.

ETHNIC DISCRIMINATION

The North American United Fruit Company officers took for granted the inferiority of nonwhites during the early years of operations. The racism of corporate officials was set in the upper-class context of Boston's white Anglo-Saxon Protestant society. Their letters, consequently, are only infrequently punctuated by crass expressions of racist terminology typical of popular discourse. Language such as “they are renegade niggers . . . and naturally bad characters” (BDA: Kyes to Chittenden,

Dec. 9, 1916) is the exception rather than the rule, and is more frequently encountered at the lower managerial levels. Executives couched their racism in pseudoscientific, patronizing terms, more acceptable to North American "aristocratic" circles. (See, for example, the first epigraph to chapter 5.)

Social relations on the plantation were formally segregated through the 1930s. A United Fruit Company farm foreman in the 1920s observed:

To avoid complications, therefore, a strict color line is drawn. All persons of color must always give the right of way to whites, and remove their hats while talking. A rule also forbids any laborer from entering the front yard of any white man's residence.

As a direct result of this sharp color line, various whites have been slain, and also (though the company officials may not be aware of it) many Blacks have been ruthlessly made away with. (Cited in Kepner 1936: 170)

The company instituted a Jim Crow system, in imitation of the Panama Canal operations, under the euphemism of "gold roll" and "silver roll." Special privileges were reserved for workers who earned enough money to qualify for the gold roll status, which, of course, was composed exclusively of whites since the salaries of blacks were too low. Mess halls, stores, dormitories, hospital facilities, and even cemeteries were segregated. On company ships blacks could not eat in the same dining room as whites even if they paid for a first-class ticket.¹ In his unpublished memoirs, Charles Reid, an elderly black Creole from Bocas Island, recalls how he and his father were forbidden from fishing in front of management's exclusive housing complex: "Maccaw Hill . . . was what you would call a 'restricted area' a white people's zone . . . [with] beautifully painted little cottages along the shore. All the big shots lived there. As fries [small fish] abounded there, the fishermen dared not intrude catching them. On one occasion my father and me, not knowing that it was prohibited to throw our nets there, were ordered away by one of the house-wives to 'get the hell away from here, just leave those fries alone; I want them for my ducks'" (1983: 8).

Ironically, however, the extreme polarization, from the late eighteenth century through the 1950s, of ethnic relations in the southern United States, where segregation was formally institutionalized by Jim Crow laws, and where lynchings of blacks were not uncommon, make ethnic relations on the United Fruit Company plantations appear almost harmonious. Officially institutionalized segregation began breaking down in the Bocas Division as early as the 1920s. An elderly West Indian who was a clerk in the company's "gold roll" commissary in Al-

mirante during this period told me that a group of wives of top-level managers actively opposed the Jim Crow policies of the company and supported him when he began to serve blacks in the commissary. Nevertheless, some legally sanctioned forms of racism persisted through the 1950s, such as the segregated wards in the company hospital.

The gulf between blacks and Hispanics was just as pronounced as the gold roll-silver roll distinction. For example, as late as the 1950s in the Sixaola District, some cacao farms were primarily composed of black workers whereas others were staffed almost exclusively by Hispanics. Elderly blacks on the plantation frequently referred to a "complex between the Spaniards and the Jamaicans" that prevented the two groups from "amalgamating."

Separate housing facilities were provided for blacks and Hispanics through the end of World War II. Several elderly blacks reminisced with pleasure of the days when housing was segregated. They cursed the "Latinization" of the management-level employees whom they blamed for breaking down the barriers between blacks and Hispanics. They claimed that it had been only since "the Spaniards took over" that "colored people" have been "made to live with Spaniards." Several perfectly bilingual black workers born in Bocas del Toro in the early 1920s alleged that they did not learn how to speak Spanish until after World War II; before then, they claimed they had no use for Spanish, which they called the "bird language" (see also Koch 1975:278).

Today management officially frowns upon segregation. During my fieldwork, however, it persisted in practice as strongly as ever. In private conversations, the North American and high-level Hispanic managers frequently indulged in virulently racist remarks against blacks.² Among working-class Hispanics, of course, the level of racism against blacks was also extremely pronounced. In fact, the stereotypes were often primitive, if not hallucinatory. For example, I was told that blacks have a tail bone on their rear from the time when their ancestors used to be apes, and that they bathe with a sponge in vinegar so as not to get wet.

Although there was no longer a formal rule prohibiting blacks from frequenting the residential complex reserved for high-level management (which is still called the White Zone), in practice it was off-limits to blacks, Amerindians, and dark complexioned Hispanics. I never saw a black or an Amerindian in the club except in service positions. I was told that there was one black family that qualified to live in the White Zone.³ The children of the managers attended a special company-funded American School whose teachers were monolingual North Americans.⁴

The only nonwhite children in this school at the time of my fieldwork were light complexioned Hispanics and one Kuna Amerindian child.

In the organization of the labor process as well the company systematically discriminated against blacks through the 1950s. All the high-level administrative jobs, and even some of the low-level ones, were held by whites, either North American or European. Through World War II, most farm administrators and even some foremen were still North Americans, although an increasing number of the timekeepers were Hispanics.⁵ According to elderly former workers, the company had a rule prohibiting the promotion of blacks above the position of timekeeper.

Company records reveal that the dual structure of wages for white and "colored" engineers and mechanics was rigid in the Railroad Department (cf. BDA: Marsh to Chittenden, June 17, 1918). On several occasions black railroad workers walked off the job, demanding equal pay for equal work (*El País*, Nov. 10, 1919:6). Ironically, as noted in the previous chapter, the company's unwillingness to raise wages finally resulted in the destruction of the two-tiered wage system. The North American conductors and machinists left the Bocas and Limón divisions because the transnational refused to raise their wages, hiring cheaper black workers instead: "My conductors have left me until now all my pickup trains are in charge of negroes, and I only have enough white conductors left to operate the main line, and am very much afraid I will lose some of those" (BDA: Kyes to Chittenden, Aug. 12, 1918).

As in the case of segregation in the social sphere, discrimination in the labor process on the United Fruit Company's banana plantations was relatively mild compared to the dual-tiered wage system prevalent during the same period in the United States and on the Panama Canal (cf. Davis 1982:18; Franck 1913:219; McCullough 1977:561, 562). Workers from the Talamanca region (both black and Hispanic) reported that most work gangs were segregated, but there does not appear to have been a fixed rule. In fact, this segregation may have been due to the imposition of a 1925 executive order by the president of Costa Rica rather than to a conscious strategy by management (*La Voz del Atlántico*, Sept. 18, 1934, cited in Koch 1975:327).

The society surrounding the United Fruit Company's operations in Panama and Costa Rica through the 1930s was profoundly racist. In Port Limón, blacks were not allowed into white hotels, and the movie theaters had segregated seating arrangements (Palmer 1977:142; *La Voz del Atlántico*, April 6, 1935:6; Rout 1976:268-73). Blacks were forbidden admission to the newly completed municipal swimming pool

in Limón in 1936 (*La Voz del Atlántico*, May 10, 1934:11, cited in Casey 1979:131). In the 1930s, during the economic Depression, politicians adopted antiblack platforms. Congressional representatives in Costa Rica gave virulent speeches advocating the exclusion of blacks from the Central Highlands and from the Pacific Coast of the country: "The people of color of the Atlantic are going to invade the Pacific with grave consequences . . . which we must confront. For me there is only one fatherland: Costa Rica, a fatherland which I will defend forever. . . . We must not permit the doors of the Pacific Zone to be opened to an avalanche of the races of color. I detest them. . . . They reproduce two to three times as fast as the white race" (*La Tribuna*, Dec. 8, 1934:4-7, cited in Beirute 1977:148-50). In Panama ethnic relations were no less antagonistic during the Depression years. In the early 1930s violent demonstrations in the cities protested the presence of unemployed blacks (*Panama Tribune*, July 19, 1931; Aug. 21, 1932; July 9, 1933; Oct. 29, 1933, cited in Conniff 1983:11).

Several authors have correlated peaks of racist conflict in both Panama and Costa Rica to the economic situation (cf. Casey 1979:128-32; Koch 1975:281). A careful reading of newspapers and of the congressional archives reveals that the publication of racist editorials, books, and congressional petitions against blacks coincided with the busts in the cycles of the company's operations, as well as with the down trends in the international economy. There were three major waves of hostility: (1) the mid-1920s when banana exports from Limón declined to 40 percent of what they had been in 1913; (2) the mid-1930s during the height of the Great Depression; and (3) World War II, which caused widespread economic dislocation, especially in Limón. During these economic crises, Hispanic workers viewed black West Indians as competitors for scarce jobs and Hispanic politicians seized on racist polemics as a means of mobilizing an economically squeezed populace.

Restrictive antiblack laws were codified in both Costa Rica and Panama. In Costa Rica, for example, an executive order in 1942 prohibited the entrance of blacks into the country (Beirute 1977:153-54); before then, black tourists had been denied visas to enter the country (*La Tribuna*, April 10, 1934, cited in Purcell 1982:89). Panama passed a law in 1926 forbidding "the immigration into [Costa Rica] . . . of Chinese, Japanese, Syrians, Turks, East Indians, Hindu-Arians, Dravidians, and Negroes of the Antilles and the Guianas whose original language is not Spanish" (Ministry of Foreign Relations 1927). At even earlier dates, restrictions had been placed on the right of blacks to travel freely within their host countries, and on their access to employment outside the At-

lantic Coast lowlands (Seligson 1980:65). In fact, in Costa Rica as early as 1890 a law had been passed prohibiting "blacks and Asiatics" from working on the Pacific Coast section of the railroad (Beirute 1977: 124-25). Former railroad conductors from the Limón Division remembered how in the 1910s and 1920s they had to stop the train in Peralta (a small town about halfway between San José and Limón) in order that Hispanics replace them.⁶ Scholars have been unable to find official documentation to prove that blacks were prohibited from migrating to the Central Highlands of Costa Rica (cf. Duncan and Meléndez 1981:88; Koch 1975:310; Seligson 1980:65); nevertheless, I was repeatedly told by Costa Ricans that, through World War II, blacks had been forbidden to visit the rest of the country. The prevalence of this belief in Costa Rica demonstrates that even if the restriction against black travel outside the Atlantic province was never codified there must have been a great deal of hostility to blacks outside of Limón through the 1950s or the myth would not be so firmly entrenched (cf. Seligson 1980:66). Another restrictive law that profoundly affected blacks in Costa Rica and that was rigidly enforced was the prohibition against hiring blacks on the new plantations the transnational was opening on the Pacific Coast in the mid-1930s (*Oficial* 1935). Similarly in Panama, when the company obtained permission to establish new farms on the Pacific Coast in the Province of Chiriquí in 1927 it placed restrictions on the employment of blacks (BDA: "Memorandum to Panama Divisions" from Baggett, Jan. 22, 1935).

Much of the antiblack legislation and public outcry that characterized the 1925-45 period was couched in nationalist language. The foreigner status of the West Indians exacerbated their tenuous position in the Hispanic-dominated countries of the Central American Isthmus. Blacks were foreigners, employed by a foreign company, hosted in a foreign nation. Historian Michael Conniff (1983) has aptly coined the phrase "third country national" to refer to the structurally vulnerable position faced by West Indian workers for North American transnationals in Panama. Nationalist, antiforeigner outcries followed the same pattern as the waves of racism noted earlier. In fact, the opportunistic nature of jingoist campaigns is well illustrated by a confidential letter from the company's agent in Panama City explaining the context for the president's latest antiblack tirade to the press: "He [the president] felt that by doing this [denouncing foreigners] . . . it would somewhat relieve the pressure which is being exerted on his Government by the unemployed" (BDA: Holcombe to Munch, March 11, 1954). On several occasions (i.e., at the height of the Great Depression) the company responded to antiforeigner press and government campaigns by firing its

most publicly visible West Indian employees. For example, a company lawyer advised the Armuelles Division manager to "increase your number of nationals [Hispanic Panamanians] especially at locations where they are more visible such as on the dock and around the shops" (BDA: Jacome to Blair, Dec. 16, 1931). The obvious phenotypical differentiation between blacks and Hispanics prevented blacks from being able to "pass" as nationals. Local authorities considered even second- and third-generation blacks foreigners.⁷ Hispanics of foreign origin, on the other hand, were usually able to become nationals in both Costa Rica and Panama within a generation of their arrival. The progeny of Nicaraguan or Honduran immigrants have blended into the local population. Costa Rica's and Panama's nationalist laws were enforced selectively against blacks rather than against Hispanic immigrants. At the same time that the Panamanian press and the president were complaining about the excessive number of Jamaicans on the United Fruit Company plantation in Chiriquí Province, the company was allowed to "encourage" labor to come in from other places, particularly Costa Rica and Nicaragua" on condition that they were "not, of course, on the restricted immigration list [i.e., black or Asian]" (BDA: Blair to Chittenden, April 12, 1932). Similarly in Costa Rica, in the late 1930s, at the same time that Nicaraguans were being imported to work on the newly opened Pacific Coast divisions, the newspapers on the Atlantic Coast were publishing threatening headlines such as "All Jamaicans in Costa Rica Who Find Themselves in Difficult Situation Will Be Repatriated" (*La Voz del Atlántico*, Feb. 14, 1933, cited in Koch 1975:281, 331).

Racist nationalism was expressed in the denial of any nationality status whatsoever to blacks of West Indian descent. In 1926 a Panamanian law had declared "undesirable" all "Negroes whose native language is not Spanish" and the citizenship of the children of these "undesirables" was withheld until their twenty-first birthday (PCCF #79-F-5 and 80-F-9; BFP # 371-12015 and #371-12785, cited in Conniff 1983: 11). Most dramatically, however, in 1941 President Arnulfo Arias, who had campaigned on an antiblack platform,⁸ worded the new constitution so as to strip some 20,000 black Panamanians of their citizenship (Conniff 1983: 11). Blacks born in Panama were subject to deportation from their native homeland and local authorities made "regular raids on labor gangs arresting all men who could not show *cedulas* [nationality papers]" (BDA: Munch to Chittenden, July 16, 1941). Panamanian and Costa Rican blacks consequently became in the 1940s "a people without a homeland, caught in a limbo" (Conniff 1983: 4; see also Duncan and Meléndez 1981: 134).

IDEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF ETHNIC DISCRIMINATION

Historically, racism, third country national status, and ambiguous nationality have augmented the transnational's control over black workers. Most blacks in Limón and Bocas depended on the company not only for their jobs, but also for mediation against the hostile state. They had few economic and social alternatives (besides becoming a small farmer or emigrating) to company employment in the Hispanic-dominated societies hosting the transnational. An internal company report revealed that management deliberately took advantage of the structural vulnerability of black employees: "The Division has not been living up to the laws as regards accident pay, severance pay, and other social privileges to which laborers are entitled by law. Apparently these payments were not made . . . mostly on the assumption that the Company wished to save money and *was safe in not making these payments, as most of the negroes around Almirante do not have cédulas [nationality papers] and cannot bring action against us in the courts*" (BDA: Hamer to Pollan, Feb. 1, 1943, emphasis added).

The threat of deportation hung like a Damocles sword over the black population whenever a labor crisis erupted. The company administration repeatedly invoked it during strikes. For example, during a strike that paralyzed the Limón Division in 1934, the local English language newspaper published warnings (presumably under company sponsorship) to the West Indians lest they should become involved in the movement: "How stupid, therefore, would it be for us, as foreigners, to meddle in any uprising of this nature! . . . [The] government is quite alive to the seriousness of the situation and is determined to cope with it, by throwing all foreigners out of the country, who attempt to meddle; and even to rescind naturalization papers granted to those who have become Citizens of Costa Rica **THEREFORE BE WARNED**" (*Voice of the Atlantic*, Sept. 1, 1934: 7, original emphasis). In the same vein, fifteen years earlier during the 1918–19 Sixaola District strike (see chapter 5) government authorities "suddenly took to enforcing strictly the immigration regulations that had hitherto been disregarded in the district" (BCO #318-350-2946: Murray to Mallet, Feb. 3, 1919: 9). Blacks could not afford to take risks and assume leadership positions in the labor movement for fear of losing not only their jobs but also their right of residence in their country of birth. Indeed, a middle-aged black explained to me that he had not been active in strikes in his youth because "as a foreigner you can't participate in politics. You have to walk behind the law; always behind the law."

On a deeper, more subtle level, black dependency on the good will of company officials for employment and for protection against deportation by racist national authorities engendered a transformation in black attitudes toward the transnational. During the racist, nationalist hysteria that periodically swept the Central American Isthmus, black workers were forced to seek protection and help from management. On several occasions company officials pressured the government to prevent the deportation of its labor force. For example, in 1926, the United Fruit Company lobbied to rescind the immigration restrictions on blacks (Westerman 1950:13). During World War II in the Bocas Division, company supervisors resorted to extra-economic maneuvers to circumvent the nationalist, racist laws that denied citizenship to Panamanian-born blacks and prevented Costa Rican blacks from entering Panama. Black workers recounted with humor how during the World War II period their North American bosses used to rush to the fields in order to warn them of the arrival of labor inspectors. A Costa Rican black who had been apprehended on one of these occasions by a Panamanian labor inspector on the abacá farms told me how he was saved from deportation by his North American superior who publicly berated the labor inspector for being a "pro-German Nazi" and for "impeding the war effort." (Abacá was being grown then on contract for the U.S. Army.) I was also told stories of U.S. soldiers lending their uniforms to black workers so that the Panamanian authorities would mistake them for black North Americans and not request their identity papers. Another common arrangement was for farm administrators to obtain residency papers for their workers by bribing local officials. This last favor, however, was only granted to "good workers."

Even the black farmers who had managed to establish themselves as cacao and banana producers remained highly vulnerable and dependent upon the company for their welfare. The transnational purchased their crops, leased them their land (or grudgingly tolerated their squatting on it). Consequently, even the supposedly independent black peasantry could not afford to antagonize company officials. The black Bribri farmer Alberto Dixon, Sr. (discussed in chapter 3) who confronted the division manager over Amerindian land rights in Talamanca in the 1910s was bankrupted when the company subsequently blacklisted him and refused to purchase his bananas and cacao.

THE BRITISH EMPIRE AND INTERNALIZED RACISM

Faced with an ambiguous nationality status and a hostile host population, blacks in Limón and Bocas used the defense mechanism of insist-

ing upon the superiority of their West Indian identity and of reaffirming at every opportunity their loyalty to the British crown. Through World War II black immigrants claimed publicly that they did not want their progeny to be brought up as "Spaniards." Typically, Jamaican mothers on the Isthmus registered their children as if they had been born in Jamaica. Middle-aged blacks in Limón recalled how their parents used to hide them under the bed when the Ministry of Education inspector visited their homes for the yearly census of school-age children.

Historians have presented this phenomenon as a psychological ethnic quirk on the part of stubborn Jamaican emigrants. In fact, however, West Indians had little choice in the matter. Hispanic society discriminated against them, and rather than being forced onto the margin of a hostile Hispanic culture, they rejected it in favor of their own cultural heritage (see Conniff 1983: 13). Evidence that the militant adherence to a colonial West Indian identity may largely have been a reaction to discrimination is provided by black registration en masse to become Costa Rican citizens when Costa Rican discriminatory laws denying citizenship to blacks were revoked in the late 1940s (Olien 1977: 148).

The West Indians' attachment to their status as "British colonial subjects" is interpreted by many scholars as inherently reactionary: "To belong to the British Empire represented not only membership in a multinational and 'superdeveloped' state . . . but also, an idea of the imperial which in and of itself became a sort of religion and developed within the individual a powerful concept of loyalty to the crown and to the values of England . . . faithfulness to the interests of the Empire" (Duncan and Meléndez 1981: 101). During outbreaks of social unrest in the late 1960s and early 1970s, black residents hung the British flag from their houses to indicate that they were neutral third parties from another country (cf. Ganuza 1979: 63). In an overtly racist tone an elderly Hispanic, exaggerating the broken Spanish of a West Indian immigrant, told me how blacks used to refuse to participate in strikes: "I can't, I can't, me Chamaikini, Chamaikini, me no understand, me Chamaikini."

In fact, however, blacks had practical reasons for wanting to remain "British colonial subjects"; it was not merely an irrational, colonialist atavism or even a form of ideological domination. Through the 1950s British intervention during moments of crisis was the only external source of support available to them. A careful examination of historical documents reveals that the British Colonial Office was summoned on several occasions to investigate the mistreatment (killings, beatings, and robberies) of "British subjects" on the part of Panamanian and Costa Rican authorities. The reports of the British colonial representatives

following the 1918-19 Sixaola District strike (see chapter 5) were openly hostile to the company and to the repressive tactics of the Central American governments. Survivors from the labor unrest of the 1910s and 1920s told me several tales of how British officials intervened on their behalf. For example, an elderly Jamaican in Limón described how he and fifty-four other striking Jamaicans were freed after fifteen days' imprisonment on Bocas Island by "the British consul who came to help us with his flag and sword." According to the jailed Jamaican, the consul berated the Panamanian judge: "You should be ashamed! These men haven't broken any laws"; and he arranged for the immediate release of all of the strikers except for two who were Panamanian nationals. The consul allegedly went so far as to oblige the Panamanian authorities to provide the prisoners with a meal before their transport (free of charge) back to the plantation. In other words the practical benefit of maintaining West Indian nationality in this case was not only freedom from jail after fifteen days' imprisonment, but also a somewhat humorous revenge against abusive Hispanic authorities. In this context the "pathetic obsequiousness" of blacks to colonial authorities clearly paid off. Perhaps the colonial ideological domination of blacks, therefore, can be better understood as a long-term structural, if not consciously calculated, response to a history of structural vulnerability.

Of course, in the contemporary period, West Indian descendants have, to a large extent, mystified the help their ancestors received from British authorities. Blacks in the Bocas-Limón region have retained only positive memories of British colonialism. They commemorate their Anglo-Saxon rather than their African heritage, since it has been useful to them. In 1964, for example, the Limón population celebrated the coronation of Queen Elizabeth with a parade (Mennerick 1964: 51).

The subtlest, but perhaps the most important, result of discrimination has been its internalization by the black population. The notion of a conjugated oppression as defined in the preface is helpful here for understanding the complicated dynamic involved. Discrimination against blacks (especially from the 1880s through 1930s) occurred in the context of a rigid class/ethnic hierarchy, whereby class exploitation conflated with the ideological oppression of racism. The black population was at the bottom of this class/ethnic hierarchy, and it partially internalized the structure of oppression weighing upon them.⁹

As has been noted, black banana workers were predisposed to a depreciative perception of their history and ethnic background because of the particularly powerful legacy of slavery and racism under British colonialism. Indeed it has been argued that this predisposition explains why North American managers favored West Indian laborers over His-

panics (cf. Davis 1980: 77; Purcell 1982: 299). Historically West Indian blacks have dominated the tasks that involve the most intensive personal contact with whites (i.e., chauffeurs, store clerks, and messengers). The North American managers probably felt more comfortable with the West Indians who had been socialized in a discriminatory plantation society than with the Hispanic immigrants who were unaccustomed to being treated as racially inferior. In fact, my interviews with elderly black office workers suggest that West Indians conspicuously belittled themselves in front of their white supervisors as a strategy to insure their promotion to better jobs. Former office workers whom I interviewed were more obsequious to white supremacy ideology than former day laborers. The success of their careers had depended upon their ability to accept rigid hierarchical white-black race relations and behave "appropriately."

I repeatedly questioned former black office workers about the history of ethnic discrimination in the company. Although their responses were distinct as to the specifics, certain patterns emerged. They showed extreme deference in their references to managers, doctors, and other high-level company administrators for whom they had performed personal services. They repeated with special relish the compliments they had received from their former bosses, going so far as to describe their facial expressions and to imitate their North American accents. They also specifically made it clear that they tolerated racism. For example, one former office worker described how in the 1920s his newly arrived North American supervisor made the mistake of inviting him into a mess hall reserved for whites. The result was a public scene and admonishment by the administrator of the mess hall. Immediately after telling me this story, instead of condemning the racism he had been subjected to, the black ex-office worker used it as an opportunity to reassure me that he was not a "trouble maker": "I don't like to embarrass. If you don't appreciate me good. If you don't want me around you won't have any trouble with me." Similarly, a former commissary inspector told me a parablelike tale of how, on his first day of work, his boss scolded him and made a rude racist remark. By the way in which he had built up the beginning of the story, I assumed he was about to make a poignant criticism of management's racism, or was going to relate proudly how he had punched the man in the nose. Instead, he told me that he had remained quiet, accepted the insult, and avoided "making a scene." He then went on to claim that this restraint on his part proved to be one of the smartest "moves of his career." He managed subsequently to gain the confidence of this particularly racist supervisor who

took him on as his protégé, promoting him from assistant clerk to commissary clerk and then to commissary inspector. He also defended the Costa Rican president León Cortés who had authored the antiblack laws of the 1930s and 1940s. In fact he showed me a portrait of President Cortés hanging on his wall, claiming Cortés had been the best president ever. He explained that Cortés had not disliked blacks, but rather had "been against young men who do not like to work." This thought prompted a long tirade against lazy young blacks. He claimed that blacks who complained about racism were merely making excuses for being lazy.¹⁰

In the course of my interviews I noted that elderly blacks who had remained as common laborers throughout their employment history were not so openly obsequious toward whites. On the contrary, instead of savoring the compliments they had received from their white foremen, they reminisced about the fierce combativity of their strikes. Nevertheless even working-class blacks (especially the elderly) suffered from a form of internalized racism.

The popular definitions of beauty prevalent in Central America are perhaps the best measure of white supremacist internalization. A dark complexion was considered "ugly"; curly hair was "bad"; straight hair and an aquiline nose were "good." I overheard an elderly black woman who was having an argument with a light-skinned woman saying "I know my hair is bad and my skin is ugly but I've always lived a proper life." On another occasion, an elderly woman selling fruit juice on the plantation explained to me: "You white people are so beautiful. It's because you originated near the land of Jesus Christ. You were born where Christ was born."

A more subtle but also profoundly revealing manifestation of black deference to North American plantation officials are the local legends from the turn of the century about the construction of the major bridges in the region. These legends assign supernatural powers to the white engineers in charge of the construction projects. West Indian day laborers mystified the technological gap between the advanced engineering techniques at the disposal of the transnational and the hand-held agricultural tools they wielded at their everyday tasks. For example, the Sixaola Bridge, built in 1908 to connect the Costa Rican and Panamanian sides of the Bocas Division (see map 2), was alleged to have been completed in one night by three North American engineers who "were spiritual mechanics" (Palmer 1981: 10). The legends imply awe, resignation, and even helplessness, before the (not necessarily Christian) omnipotence of the white company official.

The ideological domination of ethnic discrimination is by no means necessarily demobilizing. In fact, on the contrary, the conjugated nature of black oppression during the 1910s and 1920s infused the West Indian banana workers with an explosive potential. In moments of crisis, resistance to ethnic oppression became a forum for intergroup solidarity. The most dramatic example of channeling the energy latent in black conjugated oppression into an explosive movement is the extraordinary strength of Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (hereafter UNIA) among plantation workers in Limón and Bocas.¹¹ The UNIA movement swept through virtually the entire black diaspora in the early twentieth century but it was particularly strong on the Atlantic Coast of Central America. The organization's goal and central function were framed strictly in ethnic terms: the promotion of black dignity and unity throughout the world.

The acute form of class/ethnic oppression weighing upon West Indian banana workers in the 1910s and 1920s rendered them particularly susceptible to Marcus Garvey's message. He offered black laborers the opportunity for a spiritual metamorphosis. From being the lowest, most despised self-hating peons, they could become the exalted leaders of a noble race, equal, if not superior, to that of their white oppressors. Indeed, an examination of Garvey's speeches in Central America reveals that he had a charismatic genius for specifically addressing the profound psychological oppression of blacks in the diaspora. He exorcised the debilitating trauma of internalized racism in an apocalyptic, messianic manner. For example, in 1921 he is reported to have exhorted a Panamanian audience:

"I [Marcus Garvey] prefer to die, and every negro to die rather than to live and think that God created me as inferior to the white man."

Right here Mr. Garvey with arms outstretched and looking heavenwards most earnestly and fervently said: "O God!—if thou created me inferior I do not want the life thou gavest me. I prefer to die now."

Continuing, he said: ". . . I will only compromise with God. He speaks to me. He says: 'Go on because I lead.' A glorious day await[s] us when we shall throw away color prejudice. We shall have liberty and democracy." (MGPF: *Star & Herald*, May 4, 1921)

In this manner, the UNIA inspired black plantation laborers with hope and dignity.

Company files reveal that management viewed Marcus Garvey's UNIA movement as a grave danger to banana operations in Latin America. The UNIA message contradicted the ideological structure

that legitimized the exploitation of black labor. It inspired the workers to reject the psychological complex of low self-esteem that for so many decades had contributed to their domination. Furthermore, the very notion of unity of action among the workforce (as promoted articulately by UNIA leaders) was profoundly threatening to the transnational.¹² The United Fruit Company, consequently, orchestrated a campaign against the UNIA. Company headquarters in Boston issued circulars warning "All Tropical Division Managers" of Marcus Garvey's activities (BDA: Headquarters to Tropical Division Managers, Nov. 25, 1927). It pressured the State Department to revoke the visas of UNIA representatives visiting Central America (cf. BDA: O'Hearn to Blair, Dec. 31, 1919; MGPF: McMillin to secretary of state, Dec. 21, 1919), and division managers in both Limón and Bocas petitioned the presidents of Panama and Costa Rica to outlaw the UNIA's newspaper, *The Negro World* (BDA: McFarland to Arias, Nov. 17, 1919). The company went so far as to establish a network of spies to infiltrate and monitor UNIA activities in the Bocas Division; dozens of activists were fired (BDA: Anderson to Bennett, Oct. 16, 1919; Kyes to Chittenden, Dec. 6, 1919; UFCO general agent to Chittenden, Jan. 19, 1920; Adams to Blair, Aug. 8, 1922).¹³ Repression against the black dignity movement climaxed in 1922 when Panamanian police arrested twenty-seven UNIA leaders in Almirante after the company made a series of alarmist reports to the president of Panama (*Central American Express*, Aug. 12, 1922).

The company had good reason to fear that Garvey's ethnic message might have profound implications on its West Indian laborers. Class exploitation and ethnic domination were so closely intertwined on the plantation during this period that once the demand for ethnic rights was raised, that of better working conditions and higher wages almost inevitably followed. Even though the UNIA made no specific mention of labor organizing in its proselytizing, the banana workers (without the knowledge of UNIA headquarters in Harlem, New York) spontaneously assigned the organization a central role in labor organizing. In 1920, the manager of the Bocas Division reported to the manager of the Limón Division, "The Bocas people now say that they are going to refer all their difficulties to the Black Star [UNIA] people when they come" (Blair to Chittenden, Jan. 13, 1920). Similarly, the Limón manager reported to headquarters in Boston: "The Jamaicans here [in Bocas] state that her [a UNIA leader's] arrival will start a strike and that they are just awaiting her arrival in order to so start" (BDA: Chittenden to Cutter, Dec. 21, 1919). In the 1918-19 Sixaola District strike the UNIA message was central in mobilizing the workers (Kepner 1936: 180). One

can detect the influence of Garvey's style in the messianic tone of the following speech by the leader of the Sixaola strike as reported by an infiltrated company informant:

Friends, countrymen, I am your leader, and God has sent me to rescue you. Do you remember what the white man told us during the war that we were fighting for democracy, equality, and therefore to become free subjects? Do you realize your present position, . . . [the] white man is getting four to five hundred dollars per month? Do you get that much in cents in a week? Is this equality? I ask you all to stand by me and consequently we will get what we want. I expect you not to go back to work, the white folks here are but a handful, and if they won't come to us we shall compel them to fly away from here. If we could have given a good account of ourselves in the bloody war, why not here too. Why must we be afraid of the few white parasites around here. We will teach them a lesson for life. (BDA: Unidentified company informant to Blair, April 16, 1920)

Demands raised in the framework of ethnicity were infused with a profound political message directly challenging the occupational/class hierarchy of plantation society.

Company officials' letters showed alarm.¹⁴ "The [State] Department must appreciate how a fiery exhortation such as this woman [a UNIA leader] is accustomed to make before gatherings of American colored people might and very probably would affect the Jamaicans [in Limón]. Paralysis of shipping would follow as a matter of course, and probably bloodshed. . . . Whites [here] are few and poorly protected" [MGPF: McMillin to State Department, Dec. 21, 1919]. Such fears may not have been completely unfounded. In the explosive context of the period, sectors within the UNIA movement adopted radical stances. A group of UNIA-sponsored "boy scouts" in the Bocas Division spontaneously converted themselves into a symbolic army complete with uniforms, wooden rifles, and a marching band. One of the boy scout leaders (according to an infiltrated company informant), told his followers that "the time would soon be here when the negroes would be in control" (BDA: Adams to Blair, Aug. 8, 1922). Another boy scout member "curs[ed] all white people and [said] that he was waiting his chance to get at them" (ibid.).

The political explosion predicted by the company officials, however, never occurred. In fact, UNIA headquarters acted as a damper on the infusion of class-oriented concerns into the local movement on the banana plantations. In 1921, when Garvey toured Central America, the local chapters of the UNIA on the plantations were far more radical than Garvey himself. Company officials were "pleasantly surprised" by Garvey's "moderating" effect on its labor force. The same Limón divi-

sion manager who had previously written headquarters predicting that Garvey's visit would catalyze a violent strike movement subsequently submitted a relieved report: "Garvey was the most conservative man of any attending the meetings. He told them they should not fight the United Fruit Company. . . . They must have money and that in order to get money they had to work" (BDA: Chittenden to Cutter, April 22, 1921). He reported to his counterpart in Bocas the details of a confidential conversation he had with Garvey: "He [Garvey] states that he too is an employer of labor, understands our position, is against labor unions, and is using his best endeavor to get the negro race to work and better themselves through work" (BDA: Chittenden to Blair, April n.d., 1921). In fact, Garvey was at loggerheads with the local black union movement: "Mr. Barnett of the '*Federacion de Trabajadores*' [Workers' Federation], endeavored to start a counter attraction during Garvey's stay here. He made no impression on the populace. All together we are very well satisfied with the results of the visit" (BDA: Chittenden to Cutter, April 22, 1921).

UNIA headquarters had earlier ordered its local chapters on United Fruit Company plantations to avoid antagonizing the transnational and to stay away from class-oriented issues (BDA: Kyes to Chittenden, Dec. 19, 1919).¹⁵ Upon becoming convinced of Garvey's anti-union orientation, the Limón manager placed the company's services at Garvey's disposal, shuttling him around the Limón and Bocas divisions on United Fruit Company launches and trains (BDA: Chittenden to Blair, April 17, 1921). This strategy bore fruit: "During the late unpleasantness in this Division [Limón] the . . . [UNIA] was solid for the United Fruit Company and very much against the Union. Garvey's policy seems to be to keep his people industriously at work and I have told a representative here that we would aid them in any way that we could as long as this policy is maintained" (BDA: Chittenden to Blair, Feb. 27, 1922). Indeed, in subsequent years, Garvey became increasingly conservative on labor issues. In 1933 he went so far as to write an editorial praising the United Fruit Company as an example of a "good Trust [monopoly]" (*New Jamaican*, Jan. 19, 1933:2).

Blacks in Limón and Bocas del Toro no longer mobilize around their ethnicity. Although Limón is one of the few places in the world where a UNIA chapter still exists, it is only a shadow of its former self and operates more as a social club and as a mutual aid society. When asked about the history of the UNIA, the president of the Limón chapter told me that its central purpose "was sort of like social security," to protect its members when they are in need. He told me specifically that the bylaws of the organization prevented UNIA members from "messing with

politics." Nevertheless, there have been occasions on the plantation when black ethnic solidarity has coalesced explosively during confrontations between labor and management. A North American accountant in Almirante told me that during a major strike in 1960 "hundreds of angry blacks" with torches had surrounded his house in the middle of the night, yelling, "Get out, you white wretch! [*Fuera rabi blanco*]."

IDEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF UPWARD MOBILITY

Until now I have emphasized how racism and ambiguous third country national status fostered the emergence of a conservative, promanagement orientation among West Indian immigrants and their descendants in the modern period. The evolution in black political orientation toward "respect for authority" and "appreciation" for the United States is related to three structural-economic routes of upward mobility: (1) acquisition of land and transition to small farmers employing wage laborers; (2) a tenuous upward mobility as skilled laborers within the transnational's hierarchy; and (3) emigration to the United States or the Panama Canal.

Needless to say, as small farmers occasionally employing wage-workers, the class interests of the West Indian immigrants naturally changed from what they had been when they were day laborers. Perhaps the ideological implications of this transformation is best provided by a Hispanic labor leader's description of the black population's attitude toward the 1934 Limón general strike:

There weren't very many blacks involved in the strike. The blacks weren't against what was happening; they were just watching it all happen. They were all in favor of the economic betterment of the people around them. But you see, these kinds of movements didn't affect them so much, 'cause they already had their own independent lives. They were living differently from us. You see, the blacks [*los negrillos*] had their own little houses, their own "yards," their own little animals, and all their own little possessions [*sus carajadas*], and they would earn money maybe by growing cacao. Some even had little businesses.

What we did really didn't affect those people 'cause they were busy raising their chickens and cultivating their corn and working with their families only. They lived off of what they sold: yams, vegetables, yuca, plantains, and all those kinds of things. They would pay their workers in kind, eggs, vegetables.

Significantly, however, even during moments of economic crisis, such as during World War II when large numbers of blacks were forced back into wage work, few participated in labor union politics. Even though

they were full-time wage earners, they considered themselves to be different from their fellow Hispanic laborers. The common bond of class interest did not unite them because they conceived of themselves as small farmers who had temporarily fallen on hard times. They anticipated reestablishing themselves as farmers as soon as possible. Similarly, most black laborers during the 1930s were the children of small farmers, and they were attempting to save up enough money so as to establish their own farms later in life. A Hispanic who grew up in Limón explained to me: "Even those blacks who did not own their farms aspired to owning them, and acted as if they did." In other words, a small proprietor's consciousness hegemonized their perception of their class interests regardless of what their immediate class position was.

The second route for upward mobility available to blacks, promotion to skilled labor tasks within the transnational's occupational hierarchy, had a subtler effect on their attitudes toward the labor movement and toward radical politics in general. By the late 1930s black plantation workers represented a privileged class fraction within plantation society; they were a miniature "labor aristocracy," dominating the less arduous positions and the more skilled tasks. This upward mobility, however, was tenuous. As mentioned earlier, internalized racism and public displays of obsequiousness to white authorities were an indispensable part of the black laborer's strategy for promotion into white-collar positions. Ascendency to these jobs depended upon proving one's loyalty to management, and upon emphasizing the contrast (in reliability, culture, and accommodation) between blacks and "unruly, unpredictable, communistic" Hispanic immigrants. At the time of my fieldwork, the reputation that blacks had earned for apolitical passivity, was the best recommendation for preferential employment. The conservative values that emerged among Bocas and Limón blacks were ingrained in their political orientation and perceived to be part of their ethnic identity.¹⁶

Black upward mobility on the plantation has not been sufficient to guarantee blacks privileged job tenure unconditionally. Most could be demoted at any moment to the level of common laborer. A privileged black worker suspected of procommunist or pro-union leanings risked losing his desk job in the air-conditioned Materials and Supplies Department or his highly envied position as train dispatcher. Management could easily find "more trustworthy" replacements for these semi-skilled jobs.

Blacks almost fiercely emphasized their respectability and properness, which they repeatedly contrasted to the reckless, licentious behavior of Hispanic "machete men." They were extremely formal and po-

lite, and suppressed evidence of past working-class origins. For example, in a celebration of International Black People's Day (Aug. 30) in Limón, the keynote speaker specifically denied the proletarian origin of his ancestors, emphasizing instead the infinitesimal minority who had been educated in British colonial institutions: "It is an honor to speak on Negro Day. . . . [There is a] common belief that all the Negroes who came here came only to work on the railroad and banana and cacao plantations. But that is not true. There were several college and university graduates who came from England. . . . There were four ministers from England. You might ask how coming out of slavery were blacks coming from England. But there was no black boy or girl who couldn't fill the best jobs in the country by 1935-1938."

Even the poorest black families aspired to middle-class respectability. Blacks who were objectively at the lower end of the local occupational hierarchy (performing machete work in the fields) identified with the political attitudes and conservative values of black peasants and skilled laborers. They viewed participation in unions and antagonism toward management as alien to their identity. They abhorred strikes and, worse yet, communist ideas, regarding them as satanic values introduced by immigrant "Spaniard" day laborers of a "lower cultural level." I was told: "Strikes come when two people can't reason and Spaniards can't reason." Blacks supported the promanagement slate in the 1983 union elections. The Almirante voting district, where the majority of the voters were black, tallied overwhelmingly in favor of the company-sponsored union slate: 362 to 48; it registered the lowest level of support for the "communist" slate of any voting district on the plantation.

Blacks treat their attitude toward political institutions, such as labor unions or the Communist party, as if they were expressions of their ethnic identity. They identify with the British colonial empire and the white supremacy values described earlier. When I asked a former commissary clerk who had been the son of a common laborer why he was so strongly against strikes and unions, he spontaneously delivered a lecture on his mother's "Anglo-Saxon teachings." Similarly Hispanics, in describing the failure of blacks to participate in the union movement, said something to the effect that "blacks think they're *gringos*" or "What do you expect? They've always lived trapped in the English system."

North America has largely replaced Great Britain as the focus for cultural-political adulation by Central American blacks in part because the North American management of the transnational has assumed the role of intermediary between the black population and the hostile host

country government in much the same way as did the British colonial authorities in the past. North American plantation managers wielded tremendous personal power. They could hire and fire, or raise and lower wages with the stroke of a pen; they could completely alter the course of any individual worker's life merely with a nod of their head. The omnipotence of North America has been reinforced by the technological and economic gap between small farmers and transnational capital.

The massive emigration of blacks to the United States has had an important ideological influence on those in the Bocas-Limón region. Most blacks in Bocas and Limón regularly receive letters or visits from relatives living in New York, California, or Miami. The tremendous contrast in wages between Central America and the United States makes life in North America appear almost utopian. Photographs and descriptions of North American technology and of large urban centers further a vision of U.S. omnipotence.

The solution to virtually all the social and economic problems of daily life was seen in the metropolis. They looked upon the United States as a potential savior, a *deus ex machina*. Some middle-aged blacks on the plantation identified the source of their problems as the Latinization of the company; they reminisced about the golden days before World War II, when their bosses were North Americans. In fact, on several occasions I was told that the only hope for Limón or for Bocas del Toro was "if Uncle Sam comes back here and takes over again. I even heard someone wish that the "marines would invade" Bocas del Toro."

A POLITICAL GENERATION GAP

The conservative political orientation dominant among blacks contrasted markedly with the working-class combativity, described in chapter 5, of the original West Indian immigrant laborers in the 1910s–1920s. By the mid-1930s, however, it was considered a question of common sense that blacks respected authority and were passive. For example, Fallas, the 1934 strike leader in Limón, defended himself in court on the grounds that "even the blacks who are always so respectful before authority supported us in this [strike] movement" (cited in Sibaja 1983: 207). The complaint made by a British consular officer in 1919 contrasts sharply:

The present agitation [a strike in Panama] is typical of almost all those in which West Indians have taken part in the past. Avid of a grievance, the West Indian will give ear to any agitator or allow himself to be carried away

by any movement that seems to afford him an opportunity to indulge in his ruling passion. Once his appetite is whetted he seizes upon the first chance to satisfy it and immediately all reason deserts him. And his class seems to breed agitators in abundance. . . . It is enough if they make sufficiently flamboyant appeals to his emotions. The avenue of approach to his susceptibilities is always a world of pity at his unjust oppression, on account of race or colour, by the white man, and an invitation to revolt against the conditions imposed on him. This is always enough to rouse him and he will grasp with enthusiasm at any panacea offered to him at the moment, whether it be to join a labour union to organize strikes that will bring the white man to his knees, or a syndicate. (BCO #318-350-2976: [unidentified] to Curzon, May 10, 1919)

A comparison of the English language newspapers circulating in the banana zones early in the century with those in vogue after World War II provides further evidence of the shift in black political attitudes during this period. The Bocas and Limón newspapers in the 1910s and 1920s carried labor-oriented news and regularly attacked the transnational. A random selection of headlines from several different papers from the period clearly reveals their political sympathies: "Unreasonable Measure Taken by United Fruit Co."; "Labor and Capital at Loggerheads"; "Another Vile Action of the United Fruit Company"; "The Czar's [UFCO's] Latest Ploy"; (respectively, unidentified paper circa 1910; *Central American Express*, Jan. 20, 1923: 1, 2; *Times*, Feb. 1, 1913: 2). They advocated the formation of unions and political organizations: "We ought to unite in the same organization and if there is a strike we should all strike, and if there is a boycott all of us ought to engage in it. Vote Socialist. Look for your economic interests" (*El País*, Nov. 17, 1919, English section). Among the newspapers in circulation from the 1930s through the 1970s, on the other hand, not a single one was even marginally critical of the transnational. In fact, they tended to be rabidly anticommunist and rigidly opposed to labor unions and strikes: "Lenin, Stalin, Trotsky. Their names might well be written in blood—A sea of blood. What horrors might not be conjured up at the very mention of the sanguinary immortals! What crime may not be laid at their door! We deplore the infectiousness of Communism, it spreads with conflagratory rapidity . . . a soul and freedom destroying virus . . . [of] the most rabid hell-spitting Red veterans" (BDA: *Voice of the Atlantic*, July 21, 1934: 3).

This dramatic metamorphosis in ideological orientation can be documented not just from archival sources, but also by my visits to old-age asylums in Bocas and Limón. Political attitudes of the original West Indian immigrants who were over eighty or ninety years of age and of

their grandchildren reveal a generation gap. The first-generation immigrants emphasized the hardships and injustices they suffered as common laborers in the transnational's employ. As documented in chapter 5, their labor militance often went beyond an "economicistic" awareness of their working-class interests. For example, these old men frequently provided me with political critiques of the government. On one occasion two West Indians in the Limón old-age asylum took me aside as if to proselytize me, and one of them told me in a lowered voice:

You see, my dear friend, as that gentleman says [pointing to the 114-year-old] and I say the same way: A country that does not have a union is not yet a country. She *falta* [lacking] because now [if] you are a rich man and you employ me and you employ maybe fifty men. All right, we are working under your subduance [control]. We come to you and we say now we want some more money for our work and we strike. Mind, you're a rich man and you have your farm and your money and you determine that you ain't going to pay no more. And you can [sit] still for three, four, five years because you have your money to spend as you have a mind. We have nothing. When we eat, our money done. When the money done what we going to do? Needless we go to Limón 'cause all the work through the country is yours. Can't get no work 'cause its the same one master and he not paying no more. Gotta turn back to work for the same money. But when you got a union in the country the union maintain people. And there's money for you weekly. You send the agent to the office. You don't have to fret for nothing because [of] the union bond. It's a union bond to feed the people. The union able to bear the laborer.

Only two hours later, I was standing in the park with a group of middle-aged black men discussing the same subject: "Colored people never make no strike. We never know nothing about no *sindicatos* [unions]. No no no!"

The late 1920s and early 1930s marked a political transition point for the black population. The 1934 general strike in the Limón Division provides an excellent point of reference for this transition. Blacks who had successfully established themselves as small farmers were neutral, or even hostile, to the strike movement; whereas those still working as day laborers directly for the company supported it. The newspapers from the period report contradictory statements with respect to black participation in the strike. The Communist party paper congratulated the "Colored Workers of the Atlantic Zone" for "your valiant attitude. . . . Here you are on your post, giving an outstanding example of bravery, fighting shoulder to shoulder with your companions in slavery in that great battle against the United Fruit Company. LONG LIVE THE SOLIDARITY OF THE SPANISH AND COLORED WORKERS" (*Trabajo*, Aug. 11,

1934; original emphasis). The procompany press, on the other hand, congratulated the black population for its "passive attitude" toward the strike: "Blacks have provided the noblest example to all those soulless people who tried to disrupt law and order. . . . The people of color belong to the legions of workers not to the vagabonds and agitators. . . . They belong to their hearths, their children, their future not to the bands of Apaches . . . who burn up commissaries . . . who discuss the necessity of bombing the police with dynamite" (*Defensa Nacional*, Sept. 29, 1934).

The black community was, in fact, divided over the strike. Some blacks I interviewed dismissed the strike as "foolishness" and grumbled over having had their bananas chopped up by "Spanish strikers" when they set them out by the side of the railroad for sale to the company. Indeed, black farmers had a straightforward economic incentive not to support the strike. The procompany press warned blacks to protect their private property: "It therefore, behooves all who are domiciled here, as foreigners, to be very careful in this revolt, try to protect your property, try to get the identity of any one who threatens your life or property, or does any damage to you, but do nothing that can lend any thought to the idea that you are helping to foster this uprising" (*Voice of the Atlantic*, Sept. 8, 1934:7).

On the other hand, I interviewed several elderly blacks who had been day laborers during the strike and had supported it wholeheartedly. Even a considerable number of the small farmer population sympathized with the work stoppage. A former black farmer told me with pride about how he had sheltered and fed Hispanic strikers fleeing from the police. Ironically, almost in the next breath, he warned me to beware of Hispanics and never to trust them.

Despite some black support for the 1934 strike, ethnic tension was evidently extremely high. The strike was strongest in the Guapiles District, which had the highest proportion of Hispanic laborers, and weakest in the Estrella Valley, where blacks outnumbered Hispanics three to one (Koch 1975:286). Blacks were conspicuously absent from leadership positions in the movement. Out of almost three hundred people incarcerated during the strike, only two had English surnames (taken from lists appearing in local newspapers; see also Sibaja 1983: appendix). The Communist party, which provided the leadership for the strike, lacked blacks. Former strike leaders told me that there had been only one black communist leader in the 1930s and that he was based in the Central Highlands instead of in Limón.¹⁸ Correspondence confiscated from strike leaders and published in the local press reveals that the party was seriously concerned with its difficulties in mobilizing

black participation: "[We have] managed to promote a movement among the dock workers; however, this movement has not been as effective as it should have been because of the damn blacks [*malditos negros*] and pressure from the government" (Letter from Manuel Mora to Jaime Cerdas, cited in *El Diario de Costa Rica*, Sept. 23, 1934:7).

Several authors have documented that the company fomented ethnic tension during the 1934 strike by circulating a racist petition with counterfeit signatures of the strike leaders on it (*La Voz del Atlántico*, Sept. 18, 1934, cited in Koch 1975:284). The company founded an all-black West Indian organization (the "sojourner's committee") and arranged for it to denounce this counterfeit racist petition in the local press (*Voice of the Atlantic*, Aug. 18, 1934:3; *La Tribuna*, Aug. 12, 1934:1, 6; Sibaja 1983:37; Koch 1975:284; Fournier 1974:135). The sojourner's committee published editorials in the English language press admonishing West Indians to remain aloof from the strike movement: "Remember our adage, 'Horse got no business in a cow fight'" (*Voice of the Atlantic*, Sept. 1, 1934:7; see also Seligson 1980:71-72). More to the point, newspapers, apparently under company sponsorship ran articles with headlines in English such as "Cancellation of Naturalizations Likely" reminding blacks who participated in the strike of their vulnerable third country national status: "It would not be surprising if the parties concerned were expelled from the country" (*Voice of the Atlantic*, Aug. 25, 1934:3).

THE IMPORTANCE OF RACISM

The evolution of black political orientation toward a cautious conservatism (as manifested already by an important sector during the 1934 strike) was exacerbated by ethnic discrimination. As was noted earlier, the obvious phenotypical differentiation of the West Indian immigrants from the local Hispanic and Amerindian populations in Central America prevented the second- and third-generation blacks from "passing" as natives. Under similar circumstances of upward class mobility, other immigrant ethnic groups would have been allowed to assimilate into their host country societies and to rise in the local class/ethnic hierarchy. The black population in Central America has been upwardly mobile, but only with respect to class; they remained oppressed ideologically. White supremacist thought has been so powerful that the superior economic position of blacks in the local class hierarchy has not overcome the racism lighter skinned peoples direct against them. Although black farmers considered themselves to be racially superior to the Hispanic and Amerindian day laborers they hired on their cacao farms,

their employees did not endorse this ethnic hierarchy. Even impoverished landless Hispanics who have worked all their lives for black landlords continued to maintain the conviction that blacks were inferior racially. The flip side to the assertion by blacks that Hispanics are "dangerous, violent, alcoholic savages" was that blacks are "cowards who run at the sight of blood." That blacks did not perform menial agricultural wage labor was cited by Hispanics (and Amerindians) as proof that they were "lazy, ambitionless" and "afraid to sweat." A Costa Rican company official told me, "Where there is work there are no blacks."⁹

Ironically, one of the effects of the persistence of ethnic discrimination against blacks despite their upward class mobility is the preservation of black culture. Although upwardly mobile blacks tend to marry Hispanics and often forbid their children from speaking Creole English, the racism of the host society limits the rapidity of their assimilation. Were it not for phenotypical discrimination, blacks would probably no longer exist as a distinct ethnic group in the Bocas-Limón region.

EIGHT / The Guaymí Become Banana Workers

The Indians would arrive, like deer and wild boar driven out of the mountains: their feet bleeding [*los pies pelados*], frightened and with no place to sleep. Anyone could just grab them and put them to work chopping bush for any old miserable pay [*por cualquier cochinada*].

—Description by an elderly Honduran worker of the arrival of the first Guaymí banana workers in the Bocas Division in the early 1950s

During my fieldwork a plurality of the company's unskilled labor force was composed of Guaymí Amerindians.¹ In 1983, out of 5,706 day laborers in the Bocas Division (excluding the Sixaola District and the state- and privately owned farms) over 42 percent were Guaymí (see figure 2).² They were the crucial component in the company's divide-and-conquer strategy for reducing real wages and augmenting labor control. Their case provides the most dramatic illustration of what I have called conjugated oppression. They were at the bottom of the local occupational/ethnic hierarchy: they performed the least desirable tasks on the plantation and bore the brunt of the most intense ethnic discrimination.

Of all the Amerindian peoples in Panama, the Guaymí are the most numerous (approximately 55,000) and (with the exception of the Bogotá and the Choco) the poorest and most isolated (Gjording 1981: 22; see also Falla 1979 for an overview of Panamanian Amerindians). Their territory spans three provinces, Bocas del Toro, Chiriquí, and Veraguas.³ The Bocas del Toro Guaymí are the least integrated into the cash economy; during my fieldwork, most were monolingual and illiterate and lacked experience in relations with non-Amerindians. Although they have sufficient land for subsistence cultivation, their physical isolation precludes regular access to markets. Consequently, large numbers of

men are obliged to emigrate periodically in search of employment for cash income. Banana work on the company's Bocas Division plantation is one of the few sources of permanent wage employment readily available to them.

Although the Guaymí in Chiriquí and Veraguas provinces have greater access to markets for their agricultural products, they are faced by a serious problem of land scarcity and appropriation by non-Amerindians (Sarsanedas 1978; Young and Bort 1979). Consequently, they too are forced into agricultural wage work, on cattle ranches as well as sugar plantations in Chiriquí, and coffee and potato farms in other regions of Panama.¹ Relatively small numbers work on the banana farms of the United Fruit Company's Armuelles Division on the Pacific Coast (Loeffler 1975:29; Young 1971:100; Falla 1979:31). (See map 1.) Because the situations of the Chiriquí and Veraguas Guaymí are somewhat different, my generalizations on the Guaymí apply solely to those from Bocas del Toro and specifically to those actively incorporated in plantation wage work.² In fact, even among the Bocas Guaymí several subgroups had distinct responses to plantation wage labor due to the different political and economic realities they faced.

INITIAL CONTACT WITH THE COMPANY

I was unable to collect any oral history accounts of confrontations over land rights between the Guaymí and the original settlers who planted bananas in the 1880s and 1890s before the advent of the United Fruit Company. Most likely, in a situation comparable to that of the Bribri in the lower Sixaola Valley, the company and its precursors were able to acquire the fertile, coastal lands with minimal resistance from the aboriginal population because of the Miskitu raids of the previous centuries.

As was noted in the discussion of the effect of the Miskitu attacks on the Bribri (see chapter 3), the coastal aboriginal peoples were forced to flee inland to escape death and enslavement at the hands of the more powerful Miskitu (e.g., Herrera 1982). Many of the place names within Guaymí territory are of Miskitu origin and the Guaymí tell legends about the Miskitu wars. According to local oral tradition the Guaymí originally inhabited the numerous islands dotting the Chiriquí Lagoon but were forced off them by the Miskitu: "When you'd least expect, the Moskito would come down and raid these unsuspecting Indians, kill them by the hundreds. My grandmother told me that years after they would see the bones of the Tura [Guaymí] Indians bleached white on the beach in Careenin Key. The Moskito kill them out here and take

away their women and carry them away. They didn't trouble the black people though they was witnesses." Regardless of the precise limits of the original territorial boundaries of the Guaymí people in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, they had essentially evacuated the region where the United Fruit Company and other private growers initiated their operations by the late 1800s.

The pattern of Guaymí incorporation into wage work at the turn of the century was similar to that of the Bribri. Initially, their involvement in the cash economy was so minimal that they were not available for employment. A fieldwork report by anthropologist Frederick Johnson from as late as 1931 notes that "the Guaymí do not yet understand the use of money" (1948:244). Elderly black informants on the plantation corroborated this observation with descriptions of Guaymí confusion over the mechanics of cash exchange: "They were a harmless people in the beginning. You couldn't pay them with a dollar [bill]. No you couldn't. If they take it they threw it away. They prefer to see the coins." In fact, even in 1965, according to Philip Young (1978:47), most Guaymí women still did not understand the significance of money even in Chiriquí Province, which is less isolated than Bocas del Toro.

Nevertheless, elderly Bocatorans confirmed that small numbers of Guaymí began to perform wage work at the turn of the century on a small scale. They had neither the labor discipline nor the skills required of permanent plantation workers; consequently they entered into temporary relations with local independent farmers whose labor requirements were more flexible and whose methods of labor supervision were "less capitalist." Significantly, early descriptions of Guaymí wage-workers parallel the accounts provided by small West Indian farmers who intermittently hired Bribri workers in Talamanca in the 1930s (see chapter 4). Once again, therefore; as in the case of the Bribri in the 1920s/1930s and the Cabécar today in Matina, near the Chirripó Indian Reservation (see chapter 4, note 5) the black population served as the Guaymí's first link into the larger economy.

These initial contacts, like the early mercantile relations between the Bribri and the West Indian traders, were highly disadvantageous to the Guaymí.⁶ For example, Reverend Pascal, a retired Methodist missionary of French West Indian descent who evangelized extensively among the Guaymí from the 1920s through the 1960s, criticized the excesses of the farmers who first hired the Guaymí at the turn of the century for twenty-five cents a day at half the standard wage rate: "The natives of Bocas del Toro of West Indian or of Spanish origin hired the Indians to do their underbrushing of farms and the felling of trees. For this work they received a very small wage, and were really miserably treated"

(personal letter, Nov. 9, 1983). Non-Amerindians intimidated the monolingual, illiterate Guaymí who were unaware of the market value of their labor. Through the 1940s, it was a common practice for Hispanic and black workers to sign a contract with the company for clearing or harvesting a predetermined plot of land, and instead of actually performing the physical labor themselves, they would hire recently arrived Guaymí immigrants at a token wage.

By the late 1940s, the company began directly employing Guaymí workers on a formal basis (personal letters from Reverend Pascal; Dec. 30, 1983; Nov. 9, 1983).⁷ The impetus for the company's hiring of Guaymí came with the sudden increase in the demand for workers willing to engage in heavy labor during World War II when the U.S. Army contracted with the company for the production of abacá (see chapter 2). A serious labor shortage in Bocas was exacerbated by the emigration of a large number of able-bodied workers (especially blacks) to the Canal Zone, where wages were considerably higher.

No reliable statistics document the rate of incorporation of the Guaymí into the Bocas labor force, but anthropologist Leroy Gordon, who made a tour through the area in 1954, claims that approximately 40 percent of the employees, or almost 2,900 workers were "*Valiente Guaymí* [Coastal Guaymí]" (1957: 11). Other visitors to the Bocas Division in the 1950s place the number of Guaymí workers at 1,200 (May and Plaza 1958: 224), and the company in 1950 figured that 1,000 of its laborers (out of a total work force of 3,383) were Amerindian (BDA: King to Mais, July 24, 1962; Chiriqui Land Company 1951: 29). The reintroduction of banana production in the Bocas Division in 1953, after an eleven-year hiatus, augmented the demand for heavy laborers, and the company initiated a policy of systematically recruiting Guaymí workers.

UNEVEN INTEGRATION: THE COASTAL GUAYMI

The entrance of the Guaymí into the company's labor force in the late 1940s reflected (and accentuated) the incipient structural differentiation within Guaymí society. Most notably, the Coastal Guaymí managed to establish themselves in a privileged position vis-à-vis their more isolated brethren living up the Cricamola River. They had been the first to perform wage work for the nearby banana farmers at the turn of the century. They learned the skills and obtained the contacts necessary for survival in the capitalist, non-Amerindian world. Many Coastal Guaymí overcame the initial intimidation of contact with Hispanics, blacks, and North Americans and became trilingual, learning how to read, write,

count, and bargain in Spanish and English. The Coastal Guaymí, therefore, managed to establish themselves as patron/client intermediaries between the Cricamola Guaymí and the outside world. The most successful ones themselves had become small banana producers, selling to the company and to private purchasers at the turn of the century. A significant number of these Coastal Guaymí intermarried with West Indian blacks and Europeans who had settled among them in the late 1880s and 1890s, thereby further differentiating themselves phenotypically from the upriver Guaymí.

The strategic location of the Coastal Guaymí along the major river estuaries enabled them to develop alternative sources of cash income by trading with merchant boats. Over the past few decades the Coastal Guaymí reduced their dependence on wage work, choosing instead to maintain themselves as small farmers, fishermen, and occasionally even as labor contractors. During my fieldwork the bulk of their cash income was obtained from the sale of root crops (*otoe* [*xanthosoma* sp.], sweet manioc, taro [dasheen or *colacosia esculenta*], yams), fruits, fish, and carey (tortoise shell) to merchants in Bocas Island (see Cabarrús 1982: 8). Consequently, although they became more integrated into the cash economy than their fellow Amerindians upriver, a smaller proportion of their income came from wage labor on the banana plantation. Nevertheless, a significant number did work for the company. For example, based on fieldwork in the coastal community of Cusapin, Keith Bletzer (unpublished data) calculates that 90 out of 164 adult men who performed some form of wage work from March 1982 to March 1984 worked for the transnational.

Significantly, the privileged incorporation of the Coastal Guaymí into the cash economy has assumed an ethnic dimension. Although linguistically and culturally they were similar to the Guaymí residing up the Cricamola River, they considered themselves to be of "superior racial stock." On several occasions Coastal Guaymí told me they were better than the "Cricamolas" because their grandparents had intermarried with foreigners and had "mixed their blood" with whites and blacks. This ethnic ranking is reflected as well in the occupational hierarchy of the plantation. The Coastal Guaymí occupied slightly superior positions than the average Amerindian laborer.

Non-Amerindians also recognized this internal Guaymí ethnic hierarchy and directed considerably less racism against the coastal dwellers. For example, the North American in charge of agricultural research for the Bocas Division told me he would never hire any "brutish Cricamolas" for his department but had "half a dozen *costeños* [coastal dwellers]" working for him. Similarly, even though Coastal Guaymí did

not have a reputation for hard work, Hispanic foremen preferred them to the "Cricamolas"; in fact, they did not use the derogatory epithet *cholo* for Coastal Guaymí.

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC DISLOCATION

Regardless of the subtleties and the specifics of Guaymí incorporation into the plantation labor force, by 1949 enough Guaymí from the Cricamola River Valley were working in the Bocas Division for company officials to complain that labor agitators were "bothering our Cricamola Indians and we are not tolerating any one inciting this class of labor" (BDA: Masters to Diebold, Oct. 7, 1949).

It is not clear what propelled the Guaymí to enter the labor force in such large numbers between the late 1940s and early 1950s. Cabarrús (1982:6) and some of the Guaymí I interviewed claimed that it was due to the contraction of local markets during the 1940s. Others simply stated that it was in response to the transnational's recruitment drive.

Whatever the underlying economic dynamic, this process was problematic from management's perspective. The majority of the new Guaymí immigrants to the plantation were (and for the most part still are) largely subsistence agriculturalists, coming from isolated, traditional, "closed corporate" communities with minimal, if any, direct contact with non-Amerindian society. The difficulty in making the transition from a subsistence agricultural economy to one based on full-time wage work spawned a series of broker institutions, and promoted the emergence of patron/client intermediaries (cf. Cabarrús 1979: 50-56). The lack of proletarian skills of the new Guaymí laborers (i.e., their inexperience with cash transactions, routinized work hours, etc.) and their incomplete dependence on the money economy obliged the company to institute mechanisms for supervision, training, and recruitment. Company correspondence abounds with references to the maladaptive qualities of the Guaymí: absenteeism, "irresponsibility," and drunken brawling. This kind of antisocial behavior is the classic symptom of a traumatic transition from subsistence agriculture to intensive wage labor. These early Guaymí workers were operating simultaneously in two different economic systems, which had conflicting psychological, social, and logistical frameworks. For example, in 1952 the division manager complained to headquarters, "The movement of our Indian laborers is beyond our control. . . . The largest exodus of Indians is during November and December" (BDA: Bocas Division manager to Moore, Feb. 25, 1952). These exoduses were probably largely a function of the harvest season in the subsistence economy. For example, in

November and December yams, corn, and rice are planted and harvested in Guaymí territory (personal communication, Keith Bletzer). Meanwhile wage work on the plantation became so disruptive to the subsistence economy that Reverend Pascal requested the company, on humanitarian grounds, "to specify a shorter period for releasing them to go home to attend to their crops since the country becomes impoverished by the diminishing Indian crops . . . Corn, Yams, Rice, etc. The cream of labour being harnessed at this end [on the plantation]" (BDA: Reverend Pascal to "Management of C.L.Co.," July 26, 1954). Significantly, the traditional Guaymí political institutions were incapable of adapting to the dislocation caused by labor migration (cf. Bort and Young 1982: 96-98).

In the political vacuum the Methodist Church, through Reverend Pascal, played a pivotal role in channeling young Guaymí men into the transnational's labor force.⁸ The church was concerned with educating and changing the attitudes of the Amerindians.⁹ The Reverend specifically addressed the issues of sobriety, discipline, obedience, and communism. In a report to company officials he cited a speech he had just delivered to Guaymí laborers in which he condemned "the harm that is done to the machinery of productive labour caused by Strikes. To Avoid Communist agitators. The inconvenience to the Co. caused by their changing of their names as they go from farm to Farm. The need to have a fixed name . . . To make complaints when they arrive only through the correct channel & at the labour Office [*sic*]" (BDA: Reverend Pascal to "Management C.L.Co.," July 26, 1954).

In an effort to systematize the supervision of the integration of the Guaymí into the plantation labor force, the company created a special position within its Department of Labor Relations known as Indian Inspector: "In 1956 the Company contracted a well educated Guaymí to work with his indigenous brothers in order to teach them to economize, instruct them in the value of time etc.; . . . [and to] deal with the cute but bothersome phenomenon that the Guaymí adopt any surname or English name that suits their fancy and see no inconvenience to changing it each week" (May and Plaza 1958: 224). The Panamanian government's labor inspector for Bocas del Toro Province referred to the Guaymí Indian inspector as a "civilized Indian who acts as an Agent of relations between the Farm Supervisors, the Indian workers and the Company or boss [*sic*]" (BDA: Rodríguez to Sarasqueto, June 24, 1957). Not surprisingly, the "civilized" Indian inspectors were almost always from the coast. One of their most important functions was to coordinate the logistics of labor recruitment through local traditional *caciques* (Falla 1979: 19; Cabarrús 1979: 51-52).¹⁰ Labor recruiters re-

ceived approximately one dollar "per head" for each young male delivered to the plantation (see Cabarrús 1979: 50 ff.). By local standards the sums of money involved were large. For example, for the recruitment of 120 Guaymí, one labor contractor received \$145 (BDA: Rivera to Gordon, March 14, 1959).

These coastal intermediaries made unscrupulous promises in their attempts to persuade young Guaymí men to come down from their mountain communities to the plantation. They would abandon barefoot, ragged, monolingual Amerindian immigrants in the port of Almirante, leaving them without money, food, or a place to sleep. Sometimes no work was immediately available. Not surprisingly, the head of the Indian Relations Department (himself an Amerindian) soon earned the hatred of his brethren. Sixty-nine Guaymí wrote a petition to the manager of the division:

The indigenous workers complain justly for the treatment of our race representative beneath the order of M. Jorge [R]ivera [head of Labor Relations Department]. We, as workers demand that we no longer be robbed due to our ignorance, proof of this infamy was our recruitment during which time we were forced to pay as a group . . . \$1.00 and 0.50. . . . The head of the labor office has created these agents as spies. . . . And in such a manner they have made ingenious use of all their abilities by means of manoeuvres with their Guaymí agents who reach all the way to port #2 of Cricamola, conquering with their style all the Indians in order to . . . discount \$1.00 and 0.50 monthly. [sic] (BDA: Petition presented to the manager of the Chiriqui Land Company, Bocas del Toro, March 27, 1960)

By the time of my fieldwork, the responsibilities of the Indian inspector had been reduced. Direct labor recruitment from Guaymí communities was no longer performed except in emergencies (e.g., strikes). By 1979 the Indian inspector had been converted essentially into the administrator of a special dormitory [*la Villa del Indio*] for young Guaymí immigrants who had just arrived from their villages and were looking for plantation work for the first time in their lives. Nevertheless, the Indian inspector continued to play a major role in the company's overall strategy of promoting ethnic antagonisms. The young Guaymí men who arrived at the *Villa del Indio* were at an impressionable moment in their lives. Their inexperience and vulnerability led them to obey and respect individuals who claimed to be able to mediate effectively their relationship to the new alien world confronting them. Since most young Guaymí had never performed wage work and had never had substantive contact with non-Amerindians, they were extremely dependent on the inspector both institutionally and psychologically. By company decree he was charged not only with arranging

employment but also with making the Guaymí comfortable on the plantation and teaching them "the ropes." The inspector, consequently, "guided" them through their first traumatic contact with the plantation; he thereby set the tone for their future interaction with the company and with non-Amerindians. As will be shown in the final chapter on the Guaymí, this "susceptibility" to intermediaries also took the form of "susceptibility" to charismatic leadership and had important implications for the ability of the Guaymí to organize politically. The inspector's politicized message was expressed almost exclusively in ethnic terms: (1) Hispanics and blacks were bad; (2) the Communist party and the militant union movement were the domain of racist "Spaniards [*castellanos*]"; (3) the company was their only hope for surviving—"treat it well." The disorientation of most of these young Guaymí immigrants was compounded by the culture shock caused by the repeated racist slurs of a hostile, unfamiliar, hierarchical, interethnic environment. Not surprisingly, the inspector's ethnically charged political message often struck a responsive chord.

The *Villa del Indio* and the Indian inspector created an ethnic-specific parallel channel for complaints, rewards, and communication off-limits to non-Amerindians. This institutionalized administrative separation reinforced the ethnic divisions within the labor force, fragmenting class interests across ethnic lines.

NINE / Guaymí Conjugated Oppression: Race and Class

It's easy to work with Indians. They're not as smart and don't speak good Spanish. They can't argue back at you even when they're right. It's easier to convince them. Hell, you can make them do most anything.

—North American Bocas Division official, 1983

The concept of conjugated oppression maintains that ethnic domination is inextricably part of, but not reducible to, economic exploitation. Nevertheless for analytical purposes I have separated out the two forms of oppression—ethnic and economic—in order to delineate better the details of their interrelationship.

ECONOMIC EXPLOITATION

At the time of my fieldwork Guaymí laborers were the United Fruit Company's most exploitable workers. "Exploitability," of course, is historically determined. At the turn of the century, West Indians were most exploitable and were followed in the 1920s through the 1940s by Nicaraguans from Rivas Province and Costa Ricans from Guanacaste. Obviously the level of poverty in the region of origin of a population group is crucial in determining its exploitability.¹ But poverty is a relative concept. Subsistence reproduction needs are the function of "antecedent cultural [economic] norms" (Wolf and Mintz 1957: 384). The labor costs of different ethnic groups, consequently, vary dramatically: "The requirements for a minimum standard of living vary from place to place, according to the level of industrial development. . . . Luxuries superfluous to the basic process of renewal [survival] in the Bantustan

or the Mexican village, become necessities in Johannesburg or California" (Burawoy 1976: 1082).

The Guaymí were exploitable not only because of their background as impoverished subsistence agriculturalists but also because of their lack of familiarity with the capitalist economy, inexperience with ethnic interaction, and lack of political or corporate institutions to mediate incorporation into the nonsubsistence economy. They were vulnerable to abuse because they were unaware of their legal rights, and often they did not recognize when they were being taken advantage of. A high level company official told me, "The *cholos* are ignorant. It makes it easier to manage them. They let themselves be exploited. With civilized people you can't just do what you want with them."

The Guaymí were at a particularly vulnerable stage in their incorporation into the capitalist labor market. They had developed sufficient cash needs to offer their labor power voluntarily, but they had not yet become enough a part of the cash economy to understand fully how it operates. The same factors that at times appeared to reduce their employability (i.e., illiteracy, inability to speak English, inexperience with hierarchical and routinized wage-work relations, etc.) also made them the cheapest source of labor for the transnational. Not only did they perform the "dirty work" on the plantation, but they did it better, more cheaply, and without complaint.

The Guaymí presence on the plantation has skewed the entire wage structure downward according to the manager of COBANA (the state-run banana farms in Panama): "If it were not for the Indians we would be forced to pay higher wages here. Even with the 125,000 unemployed we've got in Panama City, we couldn't get them to come up here. Panamanians simply won't work for the wages the Indians settle for." Although wages were nominally higher in Panama than on the Costa Rican side of the division at the time of my fieldwork, real wages for the Panamanian-based banana workers were lower due to the higher cost of living in that country. Even a superficial tour of the Panamanian workers' houses showed that they owned less furniture and displayed fewer durable consumer goods than did the Costa Rican workers just across the border.

The relegation of the Guaymí to an inferior position in the plantation labor hierarchy has been pervasive; both management and non-Amerindian laborers often provided a genetic legitimation. For example, a foreman told me, "Indians have low physiological needs. Because of his physical constitution, he can bear to do tasks that the Hispanic just can't perform. The Indian only thinks of food; he has no other aspirations. He works to eat." Indeed, the Guaymí have earned a

national-level reputation throughout rural Panama for being the best agricultural laborers. For example, in Veraguas and Chiriquí provinces, "the Guaymí are preferred due to their capability of standing up to heavy tasks Hispanics no longer want to perform" (Heckadon and Heckadon 1983:29)."

A division manager explained to me that a greater level of labor control can be imposed on the Guaymí. Answering my question on why banana quality was high in Bocas despite the division's low costs of production, he stated that the Amerindians tolerated stricter supervision: "I hate to say it, but it's because the Indians are more docile." As was noted in chapter 1, quality control is the crucial factor in determining wholesale banana prices overseas. Intensive labor supervision is crucial for preventing bruising or improper handling and, therefore, Guaymí "docility" assumes great economic importance. In fact, even headquarters in New York City (since relocated to Cincinnati) is aware of this subtlety. In response to the same question regarding the Bocas del Toro Division's high quality-cost ratio the executive vice-president for all banana activities of United Brands told me, "Well, you know, the Indians in Changuinola [Bocas Division] are a different kind of cad [from the Hispanics]. If you instruct the Bocas people, you can make them do it, and do it well."

The greater level of labor control imposed on the Guaymí compared to the rest of the labor force was so evident that black or Hispanic laborers often told overbearing foremen, "Leave me alone, I'm not a *cholo*." On one occasion a packing plant foreman on the Costa Rican side of the division objected to the admonishments of a Panamanian supervisor to push his workers harder, "My workers aren't *cholos*. This is not the other side [of the border] where all you have to do is boss *cholos* around any way it pleases you. It's different here. Sure I can grab them and make them work faster; but the consequences will catch up with me tomorrow. We're not *cholos* here, you understand?" In the negotiations with the labor union in the Armuelles Division, where the Guaymí are a negligible percentage of the labor force, the union representatives walked out of a session in which management was demanding that wages be lowered to the same level as those of the Bocas Division saying, "Why don't you just get the hell out of Chiriquí and go back to Bocas, to your *cholos*. Here we're not *cholos*. We can't eat on *cholo* wages."

MANIPULATING PAYCHECKS

The company also saved money on the Guaymí by forgoing legal payment of their checks. Since most Guaymí were illiterate and mono-

lingual, they were often unaware of miscalculations on their paychecks. A former farm administrator told me that in the 1960s, it was standard practice to withhold small portions of the Guaymí's paycheck. Many pay calculations for specific tasks are extremely complicated. Time-keepers at the farm level, therefore, ingratiated themselves with their superiors by lowering their costs of production through underreporting the salaries owed to their Guaymí laborers. For example, when workers were forced to come to a standstill because of equipment shortage (something that occurs with frequency in the harvesting tasks) the company was legally obliged to pay a pro-rated hourly wage for the number of minutes the workers were obliged to wait idly. Regularly, however, these supplementary payments *tiempo perdido* were not reported. Most Guaymí working in the harvest crews did not own watches and could not calculate their lost time accurately; furthermore, they lacked the language skills and social savvy to be able to file a complaint in labor court.

Even when payment errors were not purposeful, the company frequently benefited from the failure of Amerindians to claim their legally recorded wage. It was common for Guaymí to leave the plantation when they quit or were fired without picking up their severance pay or even their final paycheck. More subtly, the company reduced wages by juggling the method for payment for a particular task. Newly arrived Guaymí, however, were unfamiliar with management's different mechanisms for payment and with labor's strategies for maximizing earnings and minimizing effort. Guaymí often received hourly wages for agricultural tasks normally remunerated according to a piecework rate. They were sometimes purposefully set to work in groups of laborers who were being paid at a piece rate. Laborers remunerated by piece rate worked faster than those paid by the hour since their earnings depended upon their output. The Guaymí on an hourly wage thought they had to keep up with the pace of the pieceworkers. When I asked foremen about this practice, they told me that "*cholos* don't care how much they earn. They're too stupid to understand what they are being paid."² During the 1940s the Guaymí were paid almost exclusively by the hour whereas the rest of the labor force alternated between piece-rate compensation and hourly wages depending upon the task involved. The newly arrived Guaymí workers earning an hourly wage were specifically allocated to the division's most unpleasant tasks, which were normally remunerated on a piece-rate basis, such as clearing overgrown cacao orchards or harvesting abacá fields.

The failure of many Guaymí workers to understand the implications of piecework versus an hourly wage has important ramifications for the quality of their output. Hispanic and black laborers remunerated on

a piecework basis rushed their jobs when not scrupulously supervised, thereby bruising the bananas they handled. The primary means of obliging Hispanic or black laborers to work with care was to provide them with an economic incentive. Guaymí workers, on the other hand, tended to work at a steadier pace irrespective of whether they could earn more by speeding up.

INFERIOR INFRASTRUCTURE

Another major economic benefit the company derived from its Guaymí laborers was reduced infrastructural costs. Since Amerindians were accustomed to a low standard of living, they tolerated living conditions far inferior to those considered normal by most other workers. This was especially dramatic during the mid-to-late 1950s when bananas were being reintroduced in the Bocas Division and the company attempted to save on infrastructural investments. An elderly Guaymí who worked for the company during this period reminisced, "They used to have up to 200 of us crammed into shacks eating boiled bananas out of empty kerosene cans." Housing conditions were so poor that even apologists for the transnational were obliged to be critical: "Even though they [the Guaymí] are an indispensable element in the actual labor force, the company has not yet provided them with housing. Men, women, and children live together in barracks built to accommodate single men" (May and Plaza 1958:223).

Once sufficient Guaymí were permanently employed on the plantation, the company began creating entire neighborhoods exclusively for the Amerindians. Not only did this spatial segregation save the company money by enabling it to construct smaller, inferior structures for the Amerindians, but it also accentuated the ethnic divisions within the labor force. Headquarters in Boston participated in the details of the decision making over segregated housing in Bocas (BDA: Moore to Munch, Oct. 1, 1954). In 1960 a Panamanian government housing inspector reported, "Only seven out of the 42 *barracones* and campments reserved for Guaymis" were equipped with *camarotes* [wooden plank bunk beds] (BDA: to Cantrell, Jan. 11, 1961). The housing inspector also recommended the immediate fumigation of the Guaymí quarters with DDT because of a lice [*chinches*] epidemic (ibid.).

During my fieldwork the Guaymí continued to reside under more overcrowded conditions than the rest of the labor force. Company officials justified this situation by claiming that it is a cultural phenomenon: "By nature they like to live one on top of the other [*por su naturaleza les gustan vivir apretados*]. The Indian is accustomed to live in groups; they

like to be accommodated all in the same room." A housing contractor in charge of constructing new barracks was somewhat less "anthropological" in his description of Guaymí overcrowding: "Those Cricamolas are terrific; where 20 Hispanics live 200 *cholos* can fit."

Officially the company no longer provided segregated housing. In practice, however, there were mini-ghettos of Guaymí workers within the company's housing complexes. For example, a disproportionate number of the newly arrived young Guaymí men were sent to live in "bachelors quarters [*baches*]" in the most remote district on the plantation, Las Tablas (see map 2). The Las Tablas *baches* had a reputation for being the least desirable place to live, and only young Guaymí "fresh from the mountains" tolerated being assigned to them. These de facto segregated all-Guaymí dormitories were more crowded than the dormitories of mixed ethnicity. The company did not hesitate to combine unmarried men with families in the same dormitory in the case of Guaymí, whereas this practice was somewhat less frequent for Hispanic or black workers on the Panamanian side of the division.

The large numbers of Guaymí in the day labor force have enabled the company to lower the overall level of infrastructure maintenance. The Sixaola District on the Costa Rican side of the border, where there were no longer any Amerindians in the work force, was better maintained than the Panamanian side of the division. Not only was garbage picked up on a daily basis in the Costa Rican housing complexes but the grounds were raked daily at the company's expense. In Panama garbage was collected infrequently and filth and litter abounded. Similarly the grass was chopped less regularly in Panama than in Costa Rica, and the housing was in greater need of painting. The Panamanian housing complexes in contrast to those of the Sixaola District did not have cement walkways. The Panamanian workers (Guaymí, Hispanic, and black alike) were forced to wade through ankle-deep mud to reach their shelters after the frequent heavy rains. The head of labor relations for the Sixaola District who persuaded his Panamanian supervisors to provide the funds to construct the cement walkways on the Costa Rican side of the plantation complained to me that they had resisted his suggestions until a strike forced them to accede. He explained that they "are spoiled" by the Guaymí who, "are happy to live under four palm trees and can be paid any old miserable pittance [*cualquier cochinada*]."

When I pointed out to Guaymí labor leaders that housing was better and real wages higher on the Costa Rican side of the division I was told that Amerindians simply could not be mobilized around "bread and butter" issues. Living conditions in Guaymí communities in the Cricamola River basin were so substandard that the company housing complexes,

no matter how poorly maintained, appeared luxurious in comparison. The average Guaymí had never before had access to electricity, running water, or spacious housing. One of the Hispanic union organizers I was talking to pointed to the barefeet of a Guaymí worker who was leaving a nearby packing plant and asked me, "How can you expect this man to strike for better housing and higher wages?" Since banana work was the only readily available steady source of income for most Amerindians, they did not want to jeopardize their standing with the transnational. If they were fired and blacklisted for complaining over wages and living conditions they would be forced to return to the poverty of their home communities.

Many Guaymí workers (if not the majority) were indifferent to the quality of living conditions on the plantation because they did not intend to remain as banana workers for more than a few years. Their sense of worth and identity was not defined by the working and living conditions they confronted on the plantation. They would return eventually to their natal hinterlands once they had saved enough money, or once their children had learned to read and write in the plantation schools. The transitory workforce had little incentive to organize around long-term quality-of-life improvements such as the provision of recreational facilities or the construction of cement walkways.

OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY AND HEALTH

The biggest savings to the company from Guaymí workers was the withholding of health benefits and the absence of occupational safety regulations. The Guaymí have a different conception of health care than the average banana worker. Many, before coming to the plantation had never before seen a doctor or visited a medical clinic. Doctors on the plantation told me that recently arrived Guaymí did not seek routine medical attention; they came to the clinic only in emergencies. Furthermore, as was noted earlier, they were unaware of their legal rights for sick pay, disability insurance, or retirement benefits.

During the 1950s the company returned all debilitated or superannuated Guaymí to their home communities with no pension or health compensation. The Medical Department's archives are full of doctor's reports discharging unhealthy workers. For example, "this is to advise that Chali Villagra Chio, 47 years, Guaimi Indian of Farm 61, was found to suffer from progressive blindness due to extensive chorioretinitis in the left eye. He is no longer able to work. He was advised to return to Cricamola [*sic*]" (BDA: Engler to Munch, Dec. 18, 1957).

The discarded sick and disabled workers were replaced by a steady influx of healthy ones. For example, on the same receipt the company paid a labor contractor \$13.50 for the "return of 27 sick Indians" to Cricamola, and \$60 for the transport of 120 healthy ones back to the plantation (BDA: Rivera to Gordon, March 14, 1959).³ According to elderly workers, when a young man used to die on the job, the widow or mother he left behind would not receive any compensation from the transnational. When family members traveled all the way to the plantation to register a formal claim, the company would "settle" with a fifty-dollar compensation (cf. BDA: Reverend Pascal to "Management C.L.Co.," July 26, 1954).

The frequency of permanently debilitating occupational accidents was greater in the company's Armuelles Division on the Pacific Coast where there was more intensive use of the "Bordeaux mixture" (copper sulfate), a pesticide against the sigatoka leaf fungus. The job of spraying these pesticides by hand from a pump fell exclusively to the Chiriquí Guaymí (May and Plaza 1958:223; Ferguson and Santamaría 1962: 18; Palacios et al. 1974: 5). The sprayers were not provided protective goggles and, according to the son of a Hispanic foreman who grew up in Armuelles, it was not uncommon to see blind Guaymí, whose retinas had been burned by the copper sulfate spray, begging in the streets (see also Beleño 1970: 55). Through the 1950s in Armuelles, the Guaymí did not sign a formal labor contract with the company and consequently could not have claimed legal benefits even if they had known about them (Ferguson and Santamaría 1962: 18).

Since the introduction in 1961 of the improved varieties of bananas, which require the utilization of fertilizers and pesticides (see chapter 1), the role of the Guaymí in dispensing venomous chemicals has become even more prominent. The most dangerous pesticides in banana production today are the nematicides (Mocap and Nemacur), which kill the organisms in the soil that attack the root of the banana plant. During my fieldwork at least two workers died from nematicide poisoning and many more were seriously debilitated. One was in the hospital vomiting blood and several others were recuperating slowly from overexposure. In fact one nematicide, DBCP, was prohibited by law following a protest strike in Bocas in 1977 after several workers died from dispensing it.⁴ The long-term effects of nematicides are poorly understood. Several studies correlate nematicides to sterility (Chediak 1980:72-118; Ramírez and Ramírez n.d.).⁵

Not surprisingly, therefore, the vast majority of the nematicide dispensers have been Guaymí. In fact, nematicide fumigation is one of the

few tasks occasionally supervised by Guaymí foremen and assistant foremen. A Hispanic foreman responsible for a nematocide squad told me that normally he tried to rotate his crews every other week, "but sometimes with these *cholos* you just forget, and then they get sick on you." Another foreman in charge of a squad of Guaymí spreading Gramoxone (a herbicide) told me, "If you get careless and forget to rotate them, the next thing you know the damn *cholo's* bleeding at the nose all the time and you gotta pay for his sick care for the next couple weeks."

Another Guaymí-dominated task involving extensive exposure to pesticides is that of "flag man [*banderista*]" for the airplanes that dump "cocktail mix" (Chlorotlálonil and Dithane for the control of black sigatoka) over the entire plantation every two weeks.⁶ During my fieldwork only one out of twenty signalmen was a Hispanic. Not coincidentally this Hispanic (who was actually half Guaymí and half Nicaraguan) was known as a grumbler. Every time I spoke with him he took the opportunity to complain of the inadequacy of the goggles and other protective equipment. He also expressed concern over the long-term hazards of his job when the oldest man in his crew, who had been working as a flag bearer since aerial spraying was initiated, died of stomach cancer. A foreman for the signalmen told me, "Hispanics are no good for this work; they get sick all the time and complain that their eyes sting."

The Guaymí also dominated the fertilizer squads. Foremen claimed that Amerindian skin is thicker and was not burned by the chemical fertilizers. More sophisticated company officials (including the superintendent of the Sixaola District) admitted that the Guaymí, just like anyone else, were burned by the chemicals, but that "they just do not care [*no hacen caso*]." When asked why the company did not provide gloves to protect the hands and wrists of the workers spreading fertilizer the superintendent of agriculture told me that, even if the Guaymí workers were given gloves, they would not wear them. Guaymí fertilizer dispensers showed me the raw burns as well as the old scars on their wrists and underarms from handling these chemicals. They said that they had requested gloves to no avail.

Perhaps the best concrete illustration of the advantage to management of using Guaymí rather than Hispanic laborers for pesticide dispensing was the work stoppage that occurred in the Sixaola District when Guaymí were phased out of operations on the Costa Rican side of the division and the task of herbicide control was assigned for the first time to an all-Hispanic crew. On the very first day several workers were hospitalized with severely burnt groins because of leaks from the rusted

dispensing machines strapped to their backs. The rest of the sprayers refused to continue working with the deteriorated equipment until the company purchased a new set of backpack pesticide dispensers.

APARTHEID RELATIONS OF PRODUCTION

The relegation of Guaymí laborers to high-risk tasks raises the issue of the de facto apartheid labor hierarchy found on the plantation. As was noted in chapter 1, the types of jobs available in banana production are widely diverse. Some are extremely strenuous, whereas others are soft (*trabajos suaves*). These tasks are ranked in a well-defined hierarchy (not necessarily coinciding with pay) with the Guaymí invariably at the bottom. An apartheid-like division of labor is immediately visible to even a casual visitor on the plantation. Jobs involving prolonged exposure to the sun and the rain, such as chopping overgrown grass with machetes, were performed almost exclusively by Guaymí. Similarly, the maintenance crews out on the railroad track with no access to shelter were almost always entirely Guaymí.

Rather than relying on my impressionistic perspective I attempted to quantify this apartheid job structure. According to the company's February 1983 labor roster, only 35 of the 884 monthly employees were Guaymí.⁷ In other words, although over 42 percent of the day labor force was Guaymí, only 4 percent of the monthly employees were Amerindian (see figure 2). Furthermore, a closer examination reveals that the few Guaymí monthly employees (35 individuals) were concentrated in the low-income, low-prestige jobs such as night watchman (of which there were 6) or railroad brakeman. Even more notably none of the 244 management-level employees earning over \$500 per month were Guaymí (see figure 3). In fact, there were no Guaymí in positions higher than that of foreman. Even among the foremen, only 3.8 percent were Amerindian; similarly only 5 percent of the assistant foremen were Guaymí.⁸ Once again, a closer examination of the ranking of these Guaymí foremen and assistant foremen reveals that, as in the case of the monthly employees, they were concentrated in the lower-prestige, less-desirable tasks. For example, none of the assistant foremen was in the packing plants; most were supervising either harvesting or pesticide-related tasks. One-third of the foremen (2 out of 6) were in railroad maintenance.

The underrepresentation of Guaymí in the semiskilled and skilled tasks is just as dramatic. For example none of the 50 operators of heavy- and medium-weight equipment was Guaymí; only 2 of the 75 tractor drivers were Guaymí; none of the 80 office workers; only 4 of the 143

mechanics; only 1 of the 31 task chiefs (*jefes*); only 1 of the 26 train conductors; none of the 46 technical assistants; none of the chauffeurs; none of the 24 secretaries; only 1 of the 33 welders; and none of the 26 supervisors. Furthermore, as was noted in the discussion of the privileged incorporation of the Coastal Guaymí into the cash economy, a disproportionate number of the skilled and semiskilled Guaymí laborers came from the coast.

Unfortunately the company labor roster did not specify whether or not a laborer worked in the packing plant or in the fields. On the basis of random samplings of almost all of the farms and packing plants of the Bocas Division, however (once again, the Sixaola District was excluded since Guaymí were not allowed legally to work on the Costa Rican side of the plantation), I found that fewer than one-third of the packing plant workers were Amerindian.⁹ Among the field laborers the reverse was true: well over half were Guaymí. A closer examination of the structure of the packing plant's operations revealed that the Guaymí held the less desirable jobs. For example in all the plants I visited, the person working in the disposal of rejected bananas and severed stems (*pisotero*) was always a Guaymí. This was one of the most undesirable tasks; not only was it "dirty," but it was also one of the few jobs in the packing plant paid by the hour rather than on a piece-rate basis. Similarly all the packing plant sweepers and garbage collectors (tasks remunerated also at an hourly wage) were Amerindians. When I questioned farm administrators about this apartheid structure within the packing plants, I was told, "The *cholo* does not have the mental retention to be able to learn the more skilled tasks [*No tiene retención mental para capacitarse*]."

Cleaning drainage ditches in the fields was another typically Amerindian task (see note 2 in this chapter). It required wading—often up to one's chest—through snake-infested, muddy, stagnant water contaminated by pesticide and fertilizer runoff. Foremen claimed that the Guaymí, unlike Hispanics or blacks, "don't mind" cleaning drainage ditches.

Perhaps the most dramatic illustration of the dollars and cents' implications of the Bocas Division's labor hierarchy is the artificially skewed pay scales for the harvesting crews.¹⁰ As noted in chapter 1, harvesting is one of the most strenuous tasks in banana production; not surprisingly, therefore, it was virtually the exclusive domain of the Guaymí. On most plantations in Latin America the harvest crews earned more than the packing plant laborers, even though they usually worked slightly shorter hours.¹¹ Significantly, however, in the Bocas Division, the reverse was true: harvesters earned less than the packers.¹²

This unique inverse relationship between the remunerations of packers and harvesters in Bocas was due to the preponderance of Guaymí on the harvesting crews. In fact, in the Sixaola District where the Guaymí were not allowed to work due to Costa Rican labor laws, harvesters earned more than packers. Similarly on the state-run farms in Bocas del Toro where the Guaymí represented only 23.5 percent of the day labor force (see figure 4), and where, according to the manager, there was no policy of systematically relegating Guaymí to the harvesting crews, the packer-harvester wage ratio favored the harvesters as it did on most other banana plantations in Latin America.

Another economic advantage to assigning the Guaymí to the harvesting tasks was that higher quality standards could be imposed on them. The process of harvesting is crucial in determining the dollar value of the bananas in foreign ports since it involves a great deal of complicated handling. Bruises caused in the harvesting process lower the export value of the bananas. Harvesting workers, remunerated on a piece-rate basis, would normally rush if supervisors were not watching. Since many Guaymí did not fully understand the logic of piece-rate payment, their foremen could pressure them to work slowly and with care at the expense of their earnings.

Finally, even within the all-Guaymí harvesting squads, there is a labor hierarchy with ethnic undertones. The backers, who physically carry the banana stems on their shoulders, have the most arduous task within the squad. They were usually the youngest, most recently arrived Amerindians, generally from the Cricamola River region rather than from the coast. Backers do not retain their positions for more than two years; the task is relegated to the least sophisticated, those "*fresquitos de la montaña*."

The occupational/ethnic hierarchy even within the Guaymí laboring population applied as well to other undesirable tasks on the plantation. For example, fertilizing with potassium (a particularly unpopular task since it involved transporting a heavy chemical) was usually subcontracted to outsiders who hired recently arrived young Guaymí "from the most remote corners of Cricamola [*de los rincones mas alejados*]." These contractors paid lower wages and did not provide legal social benefits (social security, health care, etc.). Eventually once these Guaymí contract workers became familiar with the plantation setting (learned a rudimentary Spanish, and recognized the alternatives available to them) they left the employment of the contractors and obtained jobs directly with the transnational.

Inexperienced Guaymí were often also hired via labor subcontractors to clear new land being opened up to banana production for the first

time. Their tolerance for inferior infrastructure and arduous working conditions made them willing to accept the rigorous tasks involved in clearing virgin jungle, building new railroads, and planting bananas. As has been noted (in chapter 1 and chapter 5), it has always been difficult for the company to find laborers willing to tolerate the conditions associated with the early stages of banana cultivation. At the turn of the century, the West Indians performed this unpleasant work; in the 1920s and 1930s it was relegated to the Nicaraguans; and in the late 1970s (when the company decided to reopen the Sixaola District to banana production) the Guaymí performed it.¹ The Costa Rican side of the lower Sixaola Valley had almost completely been abandoned since the late 1950s (see chapter 2) and by the late 1970s physical conditions in the region were virtually the same as those encountered by the original West Indian immigrants who constructed the railroad and drained the swamps at the turn of the century. As will be described in greater detail in chapter 12, the company was unable to recruit Costa Ricans to work on the new Sixaola project. Consequently, in 1977 it brought Guaymí laborers over the border in large numbers to plant some 1,000 hectares on Costa Rican soil. A North American supervisor explained to me, "Oh man! That place was hideous! All swampy, no road and full of mosquitoes. Only the *cholos* could stand it. No one else would stay and work there."

According to the accountant for the Sixaola District, by relying almost exclusively on Guaymí (specifically Guaymí from the Cricamola Valley) the company was able to clear, plant, and operate the Sixaola project on a reduced budget. In fact, the funds for investment and operation for fiscal year 1981, which were scheduled to expire by June 1981, lasted through January 1982. Perhaps even more important, in addition to staying "well within the budget," the company was also able to prevent the penetration of labor unions until the planting was completed in 1981. The official in charge of the project (who was later promoted to manager of the entire Bocas Division) told me, "While opening the division we didn't want any labor organizations during the first years at least. We didn't want any labor leaders causing trouble 'cause the opening is always difficult; there's no housing, no infrastructure, none of any of that stuff. I knew it was inevitable that eventually unions would get in; it's just a question of time, but during the first years we wanted to be able to be flexible with the workers, if you understand what I mean?" The Guaymí were crucial to this "flexibility": "If it had not been for the Indians we would not have been able to open up the district 'cause the Ticos [Costa Ricans] would not stay and work."

Guaymí laborers allowed the transnational to forgo investment in the

basic infrastructure development of Sixaola. The few Hispanic workers I interviewed, veterans of the early period (mostly Nicaraguan and Guanacastecan immigrants), cited the housing situation as the worst aspect of working in Sixaola. Not only were there eight to nine workers assigned to rooms that had been built for two people, but there was no electricity and not always running water. Even the foremen were obliged to live in converted metal railroad cars with no windows, which would heat up "like ovens" under the hot sun during the day only to drip condensed water in the cool nights. The building contractor who constructed the houses told me that the workers were so desperate for housing that they would move into the barracks he was building before he had finished installing the bathrooms, the electricity, the windows, or even the stairs. In fact, the residents of these half-built barracks were forced to perform their bodily functions in the nearby banana groves. The edges of the farms bordering on the housing complexes were apparently so foul smelling and unsanitary that the foremen had difficulty obliging workers to harvest them. I was repeatedly told stories of how unknowing Guaymí harvesters laden with heavy bunches of bananas used to slip and fall in the human excrement.

Needless to say, the minimal social infrastructure associated with most banana plantations, such as soccer fields, schools, medical clinics, or churches, was absent from the Sixaola District during this period. The company was "cutting corners." For example, although there was a carefully maintained network of drainage ditches inside the banana groves, there was no drainage for the housing complexes where the workers lived. The grounds around the barracks turned into garbage-infested swamps after every heavy rain. There were no cement sidewalks in the housing complexes, and the bottom floor underneath the barracks (which were perched on stilts) was left as mud. Similarly, there was no provision for garbage disposal and the company did not cut the underbrush around the houses. Workers claimed that the overgrowth along the paths and around the barracks was neck high and infested with snakes. A review of the internal company correspondence from this period reveals no budget for basic sanitation and maintenance. The local Costa Rican administrators repeatedly complained to their Panamanian supervisors about the living conditions (SDF: Brenes to Carles, March 10, 1980).

In addition to poor infrastructure and unsatisfactory living conditions, the Sixaola District labor force was not covered by a medical insurance plan. There was not even a clinic for emergencies on the Costa Rican side of the border. The entire operation was handled by a sub-contractor who kept no official rolls, hired people without documenta-

tion, and refused to dispense disability pay, severance pay, or any other legal social benefits. The former head of labor relations for the district confided to me that the company's use of a subcontractor for opening the Sixaola District was "an illegal smokescreen [*una pantalla ilegal*]. You must realize that sometimes to escape the maneuvers of the enemy [union organizers] the company is forced to use certain artifices, certain—let us call them tactics. You see otherwise, the communists, they always like to attack the foreign companies." By channeling the entire project through a third party the company benefited economically from illegal, money-saving tactics without being legally responsible. Among other things, the subcontractor avoided paying social security taxes, imported foreigners (Guaymí) across the border without a permit from immigration, and fired workers who attempted to organize unions or who complained excessively.¹⁴

The subcontractor also regularly underpaid his laborers. Realizing that his primarily Guaymí labor force was unfamiliar with cash relations and was confused by the difference in value between the Costa Rican and Panamanian currencies,¹⁵ he paid them in small denomination bills of Costa Rican *colones*. On pay day, therefore, the Amerindian workers received large wads of paper money actually worth only a fraction of the amount they had legally earned.¹⁶

The labor hierarchy prevalent on the Panamanian side of the Bocas Division also existed in the Sixaola District during these years. All the foremen, even during the initial phase of the project, were Hispanics, primarily Panamanians. When the first packing plant opened in 1978, it was staffed exclusively by Hispanics and blacks. In fact, with the exception of a few Kuna who worked in bridge construction, there were no Amerindians employed in nonagricultural jobs in Sixaola. The Guaymí tasks were tree felling, brush chopping, banana planting, herbicide and fertilizer dispensing, harvesting, and pruning.¹⁷ A Hispanic Costa Rican who arrived as a common laborer in the district in 1979 boasted, "I came knowing nothing; within fifteen days I had 120 Indians under me. I made myself with those *cholos*."

By the end of 1979, Hispanics represented a significant minority of the labor force in Sixaola. Their relationship to the imported Guaymí laborers was even more hierarchical than on the Panamanian side of the division. The barracks were openly segregated, with separate housing for each ethnic group (Guaymí, Kuna, and Hispanic). A Hispanic worker from this period told me that interethnic relations were tense: "I never made friends with any of the *cholos*; they didn't like us. Not one of them ever even cracked a smile at me."

Once again, the hierarchy within the Guaymí working population it-

self was reflected in Sixaola. It was the Guaymí with the least experience in the non-Amerindian economy (those from farther up the Cricamola River) who were most frequently relegated to employment in Sixaola. The superintendent of agriculture for the project told me that the Amerindians employed in the Sixaola project were "tougher [*mas resistente*], second-class" workers. Hispanic foremen who directed these Guaymí laborers told me that the workers in Sixaola "talked more confusedly [*más enredado*]" than the Guaymí they were accustomed to working with in Bocas, and that more of them had sharpened teeth. These observations were confirmed to me by the prostitutes who served the Sixaola population. They referred to the Guaymí who cleared and planted the Sixaola District in the late 1970s as "less civilized" and more prone to drunken fighting.

The advantage to the company of these inexperienced Guaymí workers became apparent in mid-1981 when the ethnic composition of the labor force changed abruptly because of the devaluation of the Costa Rican currency. The company replaced the Guaymí with Costa Rican Hispanics who had suddenly become less expensive. Within a few months, however, the Costa Rican Hispanics in Sixaola staged a strike, which lasted for over one month (see chapter 13). They would not tolerate the conditions under which the Amerindians had been working and living. Indeed, the rapidity with which the strike was organized as well as its militancy and high casualty toll (several people were killed) illustrates well the differences in exploitability between Hispanic and Guaymí workers (see chapter 13).

Company officials and contractors were not the only people exploiting the Guaymí economically. Local merchants with no formal relationship to the transnational also systematically shortchanged and overcharged the Amerindian population. In fact, the most frequent contact the Guaymí had with Hispanics, aside from their foreman at work, was with merchants. These merchants often openly ridiculed their Amerindian customers even as they profited from them. For example, a Hispanic woman who worked in one of the stores on the Costa Rican side of the border where many Guaymí came to buy their provisions because of the exchange-rate differential told me that her boss ordered her to raise prices to *cholitos*. The Guaymí customers had no conception of the value of Costa Rican currency. They would attempt to pay for large supplies of groceries with a handful of ten- or twenty-cent bills that the money changers at the border crossing had slipped them. Hispanic clothes sellers showed me brightly colored polyester clothes and plastic bangles painted in gold, silver, and red that they would sell to the Guaymí at far above market prices.

The Guaymí's most intensive trade relationship, however, was with the teams of traveling salesmen peddling durable household goods (watches, radios, and even battery-powered television sets). There were about a dozen of these salesmen at the time of my fieldwork. They were all from the Spanish province of Galicia and most were related by family ties. They formed a kin-based mercantile monopoly, which had operated in the region for almost twenty years. Their strategy was to approach the Guaymí just as they stepped out of the pay car in order to sign them up for the purchase of an expensive item at a low weekly installment to be deducted directly from their paycheck.¹⁸ Inexperienced Guaymí workers, unfamiliar with this ploy, thought that they were receiving a highly prized consumer item for merely a token payment along with their signature (or thumb print). This arrangement (*descuenta en planilla*) was illegal in Costa Rica since by the time the full cost of the item had been deducted from a worker's paycheck (without the worker ever seeing the money) the merchant had received several times the market value of the product.¹⁹

I frequently overheard these local merchants (especially the money changers and the grocery store operators at the border crossing) brag over how much they had overcharged the *cholos* earlier that day. With time the Amerindian workers either overheard these insults or realized by comparative shopping that they were being exploited and ridiculed. Because these merchants and money changers were independent from the company, this exploitative mercantile relationship obfuscated (as will be discussed in greater detail in the following chapter) the fact that the company was their primary agent of economic exploitation. Their attention, therefore, was diverted from their relationship as exploited wage laborers. They did not perceive their oppression in the economic sphere, but rather as Amerindians, suffering from the abuse of black and Hispanic racists. Guaymí resentment was, consequently channeled into ethnic antagonism rather than toward a class analysis, or even toward an awareness of economic self-interest. Most Guaymí perceived racism and non-Amerindians per se as the root of their problems on the plantation.

IDEOLOGICAL DOMINATION: RACISM

The extreme forms of economic (class-rooted) exploitation described in the previous section represent only an incomplete portion of the experience of oppression of the Guaymí banana plantation worker. The remainder is ideological; it is the racist ridicule to which they were submitted by all the ethnic groups on the plantation, including other

Amerindians. As noted earlier, I intentionally devoted considerable space in this chapter to the subject of ethnic discrimination because the pervasiveness of the racist experience in Guaymí plantation life is crucial to understanding why no interethnic alliance based on economic self-interest has emerged among the Bocas Division labor force. Racism was directed against the Guaymí by everyone in the region regardless of whether or not they had a formal affiliation with the transnational. In the same way that the abuses of the merchants and money-changers channeled Guaymí attention away from their exploited, economic class-based relationship to the transnational, so too did the pervasiveness of racism.²⁰

The numerous comments by non-Amerindians (especially company administrators and foremen) cited in earlier sections illustrate the racist assumptions prevalent in Bocas del Toro society. The ethnic hierarchy throughout the plantation region was rigidly defined; it was accepted as a matter of common sense that the Guaymí were inferior human beings. Anyone who defended the humanity of the Guaymí in public was considered simple-minded. For example, a North American teacher at the company's exclusive primary school, reserved for the children of high-level management, was received at first with mirth but then with frank disbelief and horror by her pupils when she tried to explain to them that all humans are created equal. So prevalent were racist assumptions that the students actually thought that their teacher was joking for proposing such "nonsense." A common expression of disgust among the children was "stop acting like a *cholito*." The adult members of the company administration also affirmed racism as if it were a matter of common sense.²¹ For example, a high-level company official showed me the following excerpt from his journal, with no self-conscious awareness of its profoundly social Darwinist, racist content:²²

I always photographed the tropical specimens we acquired, and lined up Pancho [a pet monkey] beside our yard boy, Martin Beker, along with Sam our son. Martin Beker was a Cricamola Guaymí Indian with a hunched body and a face closely resembling a Neanderthal man. He was a nice, kind person who spoke crude Spanish but nevertheless looked very primitive. The three individuals in the photo held hands and the picture turned out great. In fact it looked like a textbook example of evolution: monkey, the missing link, and *Homo Sapiens*. It would convince any doubter after seeing these three hominoids lined up together. Charles Darwin certainly would have approved.

Public acceptance of Guaymí inferiority was so deeply entrenched in Bocas del Toro that local authorities enforced different legal sanctions on Amerindians when they broke the law. For example, instead of receiving a fine or being confined to jail for twenty-four hours when ar-

rested for drunk and disorderly conduct, Guaymí were forced to perform hard labor, cleaning public parks with a machete. The judge of Almirante (a black woman of West Indian descent) explained the logic for this differential treatment: "You see we just study the people and what we most do is give them punishment working. What we just do now is put them in them hot sun and give them a job to do. So they don't like that. And we hardly have so much problem with the Indians again." According to this judge it was not necessary to administer physical, humiliating punishment to control drunk and disorderly Hispanics and blacks since they would respond to the "civilized" admonishments of fines or overnight imprisonment. The Guaymí, on the other hand, "only learned" when they were physically punished and ridiculed publicly by grueling labor in the hot sun.

A more subtle local expression of disregard for the Guaymí was the constant references to "dead *cholos*" in casual conversation. Non-Amerindians enjoyed recounting nonchalantly "dead *cholo* stories." I was frequently asked if I had heard about the "latest drunk *cholo*" who had fallen off the Sixaola Bridge or been run over by a company fruit train. The Panamanian author, Joaquín Beleño, provides a subtle portrayal of this racist dynamic in his novel on the Guaymí in the Armuelles Division. He depicts Hispanics in a stalled train exchanging "dead *cholo*" gossip in order to pass the time: "The passengers started to converse in order to diminish the delay: 'the other day in Farm 29, the train ran over five Indians who were drunk on the track. It squashed them into one big mush'" (1970: 30).

DISLOCATED TRADITION

When questioned about their disrespect for the Guaymí, Bocatorans pointed to specific patterns of Guaymí behavior as proof of Amerindian inferiority. Having been thrust suddenly into full-time wage work in an ethnically hostile environment, the Guaymí displayed certain pathological patterns of maladaptation. The most notable was massive alcohol consumption. It was commonplace to see inebriated Guaymí reclining or passed out on the train tracks. In addition to public displays of extreme intoxication, Amerindians frequently attempted to commit suicide when drunk, engaged in public brawling, and sharpened their teeth in public. Part of the problem was simply cultural misunderstanding. For example, Guaymí society regards sharpened teeth as beautiful. When they proudly displayed their filed canines to non-Amerindians on the plantation, however, they were considered savage or "wild beasts."²¹ Similarly, in traditional Guaymí society fist fighting between intoxicated

men occurs regularly in ritualized settings known as *balsería* (*krun*) and *kubuidi*, serving an important social function (Young and Howe 1976; Reverte 1963: 92). On the plantation, however, in the context of potent rotgut and a hostile non-Amerindian audience, the fights became degrading drunken brawls.

On any given payday, young, drunk Guaymí men, barely able to stand on their feet, took turns punching one another in the face. Invariably a crowd of mixed ethnicity jeered them on. Meanwhile intoxicated Guaymí spectators inspired by the *balsería* started fights with other drunk Amerindians standing next to them. Sometimes up to a half-dozen staggering young men alternately pounded one another in the face and in drunken slow motion fell in the mud. The fights ended when one young man, his face a bloody mess, could no longer lift himself out of the mud. Apparently these fights do not engender hard feelings; often the two fist fighters walked off arm in arm and shared another bottle of liquor. By early evening on a typical payday there were bloodstained, mud-coated Guaymí passed out or groaning in garbage piles and drainage ditches throughout the plantation. Indeed, an account of Guaymí drunkenness from the late 1950s when Amerindians were just beginning to work on the plantation in large numbers reveals how pathetic they could be made to appear in their first immersion into non-Amerindian society:

With rare exceptions Guaymies will spend almost all of their weekly pay on the same day they receive it (Saturday). Many do not even know how to count their money, but they do know that the paper and coins which they receive at the Company pay car can be exchanged for liquor and women at the local *cantinas*. It goes without saying that brawls are legion, and on Saturday evenings it is quite common, even at early hours, to find exhausted, drunken Indians sprawled in the gutters, on the roads, and along the railroad tracks. (LaBarge 1959: 226)

In its indigenous context, on the other hand, intoxication and fist fighting assumed an entirely different dimension. These "fights" represented a means for institutionalizing regional leadership patterns and alliances, as well as a way of demonstrating personal valor:

Assuming dramatic fighters' poses that remind one of the ancient Greeks, they begin striking one another with their bare fists. Some of the blows hit home and soon they are bleeding from the mouth, nose, ears, or eyebrows . . . They fall to the ground or into the mud . . . so that by the end of the fight the Indians are covered in mud from head to foot. . . . At the end . . . they rise up muddy and bleeding and hug. . . . There are moments when there are more than fifty Indians fighting simultaneously all through the field. (Reverte 1963: 92)

Elderly Hispanic laborers told me that in the late 1940s and early 1950s the Guaymí workers staged these *balsería* contests among the residents of different dormitories and farms as if it were one community challenging another.

APARTHEID IN THE BROTHEL

The pervasiveness of ethnic antagonism on the plantation was best documented in the brothels frequented by all the ethnic groups. Indeed, an examination of social relations in the context of sex and alcohol provides a perspective on the degree of interethnic tension between the Guaymí and the rest of the population. Brothels were the only public locale in which Hispanics, blacks, and Amerindians regularly interacted socially. Racism was so persistent, however, that the men were loath to have sexual relations with a woman who served other ethnic groups. The prostitutes were forced to cater to clientele by ethnicity. Hispanic and black workers, for example, would not associate with women patronized by Guaymí. Whereas blacks regularly selected women who had Hispanic customers, the reverse was not true. Hispanic and Guaymí abhorrence of blacks was legitimized with the pseudo-scientific explanation that the abnormal size of the penis of blacks "stretches" the women.

The segregation of prostitutes by ethnic group was so formalized that there were names for their ethnic specializations. A woman who reserved herself for the Guaymí was known as a *cholera*; a woman who served only blacks was a *negrera*. Regardless of their clientele specialty, however, all the women were of the same ethnicity: Hispanics, usually from Guanacaste.²⁴

Several *choleras* were upset at the abuse suffered by their Amerindian customers. They complained that Hispanics and blacks took advantage of drunk Guaymí, "sponging" them for free drinks and never buying them any in return. These women were articulate in their criticism of their fellow Hispanics for discriminating against the Amerindians: "There's nothing bad about the Indians? I make more money than most of the other women because I treat the *cholos* with respect. . . . That's all you have to do; after all, all men are equal aren't they? I mean, we all have to die, don't we?" They even went so far as to praise the Guaymí for certain social behavior patterns stemming from their "closed corporate" traditional communities. For example, when only one Guaymí in a large group had money he would share his beer with all the others, dividing it up into small cups.

According to the *choleras*, another advantage in dealing with Guaymí men was that they were shy, inexperienced, intimidated by Hispanic women, and they completed the sexual act rapidly. Newly arrived Guaymí were so modest that they did not even take off their clothes. One prostitute told me that she selected the Amerindians "freshest from the mountains" because then she could be sure that they were free from disease. She also pointed out that she was specially prized by the Guaymí for her low stature, abundant corpulence, long black hair, and "Chinese eyes" [*ojos achinados*]. Each ethnic group had its own conception of female beauty. This aesthetic changes, however, with one's level of acculturation. For example, according to this same "short, fat, Chinese-eyed [*gorda chapara achinada*]" prostitute, older Guaymí who had been on the plantation many years preferred the same physical type that Hispanic men were attracted to: tall, light-skinned, and corpulent. Patterns of acculturation and internalized racism, therefore, expressed themselves through lechery and aesthetics.

All the prostitutes complained that the Guaymí drank too much. They said that the previous year ("before the *cholos* started civilizing themselves"), they were obliged to halt work on Saturday and Sunday afternoons because of outbreaks of fist fighting. The customers stood on the tables to watch the barehanded boxing matches of the drunk Guaymí patrons. On busy days the 40 square yards around the toilets were reserved for intoxicated Guaymí to fight and fall over one another on a slippery floor covered by a film of slime from the overflowing urinals.

The Guaymí limited the hours they frequented the brothel in order to be in the majority when they were present. All of them left by night-fall. Early Sunday and Saturday afternoons the Amerindians usually outnumbered the rest of the ethnic groups. The "second-rate" brothel at which sexual contact was seventy cents cheaper in U.S. currency (\$4.30 instead of \$5.00) was more popular with the Guaymí workers since Hispanics frequented it less. It was smaller, dirtier, and had fewer women.² Guaymí could be found in the second-rate brothel even in the early evenings.

The dance hall, the other main locale of diversion on the plantation, was more rigidly segregated than the brothels. Blacks and Hispanics mingled freely in it, and mixed black/Hispanic couples were not unusual. The only Guaymí I ever saw in the dance hall, however, was a young man who rejected his Amerindian ethnicity and successfully passed as a Costa Rican Hispanic. In fact, from his accent, clothes, and actions there was no way of distinguishing him as an Amerindian. The

owners of the dance hall probably did not have a policy of refusing entrance to Amerindians, but evidently the Guaymí felt uncomfortable enough among Hispanics and blacks not to enter. Similarly, Guaymí were never present at any of the periodic fairs held in Sixaola to celebrate religious holidays or to raise money for municipal projects.

GUAYMI RESPONSES TO RACISM

The Guaymí responded to the constant racism directed against them by taking refuge exclusively among themselves in order to minimize insults to their culture and dignity from non-Amerindians. Consequently they harbored a defensive hatred (or at best a profound mistrust) for non-Guaymí and exuded this tension in public. Guaymí, for example, did not look at non-Amerindians in the eyes when passing on the street.²⁶ When I attempted to initiate conversations with Guaymí I was almost invariably met with a stony silence, even by those who were fluent in Spanish. In an effort to gain friends and trust (as well as to show respect), I attempted to learn a minimal Guaymí vocabulary. Most Guaymí, however, thought that I was trying to make fun of them when I would ask the meaning of words in their language.

Expression of interethnic friendship was rarely publicly displayed. For example, a Costa Rican Hispanic (who was a Communist party member and articulate in his denunciation of economic exploitation) told me how he had gained the trust of a Guaymí worker by helping him unload cement from a cart on his own time at work, only to be rebuffed by that same Amerindian worker later in the week when he met him in the brothel and attempted to befriend him. His Guaymí work companion told him that it was not right for them to be seen sitting together in public because the other Amerindians in the brothel might think he was being taken advantage of or insulted. In other words the Guaymí experience with interethnic personal relationships has been so consistently bitter that they assumed that Hispanics only accost Amerindians with hostile intent. The only other case of Guaymí-Hispanic friendship I documented was between two members of the Communist party, both of whom were outcasts from their own societies because of their political militancy.

The pattern of Guaymí mistrust and open dislike for non-Amerindians is confirmed in a 1960s' fieldwork observation on the Chiriquí Guaymí: "The Ngawbe [Guaymí] are extremely reticent in talking to outsiders about themselves except regarding the most banal topics. This attitude may be the result of long and sad experience. The Ngawbe

are aware that many Latinos consider them to be dirty, ignorant savages and openly ridicule their customs and beliefs. Thus, my initial attempts to delve into the mysteries of their culture were met with reticence and silence, and with requests that I go back where I came from" (Young 1971:31).

Finally, the most noxious aspect of the ideological domination of the Guaymí is the pathology of internalized racism. As noted in the preface, it is difficult for an ethnographer from the dominant ethnic group to analyze internalized racism objectively. Nevertheless it is an important dynamic with respect to how it has affected the ability of the Guaymí to organize effectively and to select leadership. Several times I heard Guaymí leaders call their people *cholos*, and criticize them for "lacking civilization," or for having a "low cultural level." Guaymí banana workers regularly referred to their language as a "dialect" and discouraged their children from speaking the Guaymí language, even when they themselves spoke a thickly accented, grammatically flawed Spanish. The following tract written by an Amerindian organization in the mid-1960s illustrates the racist tone with which semiacculturated Guaymí on the plantation referred to their own culture:²⁷ "We request a law that would prohibit the sale of liquor to the indigenous people until they are completely civilized, take the example of the government of the United States which decreed a dry law for its red skin indigenous people²⁸ and introduced them to civilization; today the red skin Indians live in a new manner. That is how we want our government to treat us" (BDA: Indigenous Watch Committee, May 9, 1965).

Internalized racism results in passivity, helplessness, and deference to the dominant ethnic group. Repeatedly Amerindians genuinely concerned with improving the conditions of their people on the plantation told me that they needed a white man to lead them and organize them. They treated the trappings of Western culture (i.e., pressed clothes, large cars, and expensive wristwatches) with great respect. One of the few Guaymí union leaders involved in local Communist party organizing complained that his fellow Amerindian workers preferred to see him dress and act "like a Hispanic bourgeois than an Indian worker." They were more impressed when he wore his most expensive clothes and carried a briefcase than when he walked through the fields and packing plants in work clothes to investigate working conditions and morale.

This deference to non-Amerindian "civilization" on the part of Guaymí workers was not without internal contradiction and has not always resulted in political paralysis. Because deep emotions were involved, there was a powerful, explosive dimension to Guaymí politics.

Amerindian workers have mobilized around charismatic leaders in movements to redeem the Guaymí race. Likewise, on several occasions many plantation Guaymí have metamorphosed their low self-image into a deeply felt awareness of injustice and personal humiliation. The process is comparable to a religious conversion experience.

TEN / Political Implications of Guaymí Conjugated Oppression

The worst crime the white has ever committed was to teach us to hate ourselves.

—Malcolm X

The Guaymí experience of dual oppression discussed in the previous chapter has profoundly affected their patterns of political mobilization. Most important, political discussion and confrontation among Bocas Division workers revolved around ethnicity rather than class. Ethnic antagonisms were crucial to management because they maintained a divided labor force and also steered popular discourse away from issues of class and economic exploitation. Over the past three decades the Guaymí have been the crucial ethnic group in the process of political segmentation.

EARLY GUAYMI ATTEMPTS TO ORGANIZE

The post-World War II years were a period of expansion and development for the United Fruit Company in Latin America. Banana workers throughout Central and South America took advantage of this economic boom in order to pressure for economic and political demands. The 1950s presaged an era of mounting labor militancy. Dozens of banana worker labor unions were established and numerous strikes followed. In fact, by the mid-1950s, of all the company's operations in Latin America, only the two divisions in Panama (Bocas del Toro and Armuellcs) were without independent labor unions.¹

The incorporation of the Guaymí into the labor force during the 1950s proved pivotal to the company's ability to prevent unionization. Despite a sharp increase in demand for laborers (the labor roster increased from 3,383 in 1950 to 5,298 in 1955), the Bocas Division banana workers remained unorganized. In contrast, the workers in the Sixaola District on the Costa Rican side of the division (where the Guaymí were not permitted to work according to Costa Rican law) formed a union in 1953. The union was successful even though cacao was the only crop grown in Costa Rica, and is much less labor intensive than bananas.

Company archives reveal that attempts to form an independent labor union on the Panamanian side of the Bocas Division were repeatedly repressed by the transnational, as the following telegram to the President of Panama from a labor organizer illustrates:¹ "[Union] delegates fired for attending union assembly. . . . Authorities [of the Ministry] of Labor have done nothing except for ordering the eviction of 32 families from Company housing including the Secretary General of the Union, Cristobal Martinez with his nine children and wife in advanced state of pregnancy, workers rights have not been respected . . . no right to unionize. . . . We are waiting for your defense of the rights of the workers and union freedom" (BDA: Zapata et al. to President of Panama, Oct. 21, 1950). According to veterans from this period, anyone seen talking with a known labor union organizer was immediately fired.

These early attempts at fomenting an independent union movement were led by Hispanics and did not attract Amerindian support. The Guaymí workers, however, were not inactive. They repeatedly attempted to organize to promote their interests but always separately from the rest of the non-Amerindian labor force. They focused on a combination of Amerindian ethnic concerns and banana worker-oriented economic demands. For example, the slogan of a leaflet confiscated by the company during the 1950s reads: "One Common Cause: The Social Demands of the Indigenous Peoples" (BDA: Loose papers from 1950s file). Significantly, the Guaymí from Chiriquí in the Armuelles Division on the Pacific Coast were the first to promote specifically indigenist or culturalist Amerindian worker organizations (Palacios et al. 1974: 9–16). The Chiriquí Guaymí have historically been less isolated and more integrated than the Bocatorans in banana wage work and the cash economy. In fact, several Chiricano Guaymí came to the Bocas Division to foment the Amerindian rights movement there. One of these organizers was detected by the head of the Labor Relations Department. He reported to the Ministry of Labor that a "guaimic aborigine [*sic*]" was engaging in subversive activities: "[He] preaches the

ideals of betterment, morality, [and] civility . . . [and] organize[d] an Indian worker movement in the Port Armuelles division of the Chiriquí Land Company which had as consequence several work stoppages and culminated in the strike which was formally declared illegal by a functionary of the Ministry of labor in the province of Chiriquí, *resulting in the firing of 614 Indian workers* (BDA: Aizpurúa to Ramos, March 30, 1954; emphasis added).

In addition to revealing the level of repression to which labor organizers were submitted (i.e., that 614 workers could have been fired so summarily for striking) this letter illustrates that even social and cultural demands such as "betterment, morality, [and] civility" were a threat to the company.¹ Indeed, the transnational paid close attention to any attempt by the Guaymí to organize even when the stated goals of the organization explicitly had nothing to do with labor issues or plantation life. For example, the head of the Labor Relations Department maintained a file of newspaper clippings on Guaymí demands for a politically autonomous reservation (cf. BDA: Letter to the Editor, *El Día*, Dec. 5, 1957). The Labor Relations Department even infiltrated a Guaymí informant into the organizational meetings of the Guaymí Congress, which was founded in Guaymí territory to lobby for Amerindian political and human rights (BDA: Villagra to Rivera, Aug. 25, 1959; Sept. 24, 1959; Oct. 23, 1959).

The level of surveillance of these incipient indigenous rights groups indicates that the company realized that, even when Guaymí organizations did not specifically target worker-oriented demands, they were dangerous to the plantation status quo. As in the case of the Marcus Garvey movement among the West Indian labor force during the 1920s (see chapter 7), any manifestation of unity of action and any demand for ethnic dignity and rights threatened the company's control over its laborers. A company lawyer denounced the "suspicious nature" of the budding indigenous rights movement to the local authorities in the late 1950s (BDA: Escovar to Municipal Mayor, Sept. 10, 1960). Similarly, the manager wrote to the Ministry of Labor and accused the Amerindian movement in Bocas of being a communist conspiracy: "The so-called Indigenous Provincial Association celebrated by the Guaymí Indians of this region at the mouth of the Sixaola River . . . I would like to inform you was promoted and directed by persons with well-known links to national and international communism, it had no goal other than to foment a mood of concern among the Indians living in the Cricamola region" (BDA: King to Oller de Sarasqueto, May 11, 1963).

Indeed, as in the case of the West Indian Garveyites in the 1920s, the attempts by the Guaymí to defend their cultural rights gravitated

toward politically oriented economic demands. The Labor Relations Department files from the period contain letters from spontaneously formed Guaymí associations of workers specifically addressing labor issues; hence the following petition to the manager signed by sixty-nine Guaymí workers:

We are prevented from presenting our complaints through our representative because they [the Indian inspectors] are well schooled by their chief, Mr. Jorge [R]ivera who with respect to any complaint related to pay time or abuse or any sickness or accident help said man immediately and without hesitating is fired without any more justification than his being a troublemaker and he should not be complaining; in fact he is supposed to be thankful to the company which has him working. Today we are sick and tired of this issue and if we were contracted from the port #2 [on the Cricamola River] then we shall leave in the direction of that region. [sic] (BDA: "Petition to manager of the Co. Chiriqui Land," March 27, 1960)

The poor quality of the Spanish language and grammar in this petition reveals the serious limitations of the literacy skills of the Guaymí laborers during this period and, more important, shows how isolated they were from their Hispanic co-workers. Evidently, this relatively large, mobilized group of Guaymí did not have confidence in a literate Hispanic to proofread their petition. The Hispanic labor organizers who were circulating through the plantation during this period evidently did not develop contacts with the mobilized sectors of the Amerindian workforce. Ironically, therefore, "international and national communism" failed to do exactly what the division manager accused it of: promoting the indigenous rights movement. Though the Hispanic and Amerindian workers failed to make common cause, the company did not hesitate to repress both ethnic groups indiscriminately when they attempted to organize. It developed a sophisticated network of surveillance, complete with a computerized blacklist, which it consulted before hiring new workers (see chapter 1).

The tense situation of the late 1950s finally erupted in 1960 with a three-week-long general strike. For a brief historical moment, the union-organizing attempts of the Hispanic laborers converged with the Amerindian rights movement and resulted in an explosive mobilization. The Guaymí laborers played a pivotal role in the 1960 strike. They responded with greater militancy and unity of action than any other ethnic group. The strike unleashed the repressed, internalized energy associated with ideological oppression and fused it with the concrete economic demands they shared with the entire labor force. In fact, the

Guaymí initiated the work stoppage on November 2, when they walked out of the fields demanding a wage hike from twenty-two to forty cents per hour. It was not until the following day that the non-Amerindian laborers followed suit.

The unity of action of the Guaymí and the non-Amerindian labor force caught the company by surprise. In fact, just before the initiation of the strike, the workers of the Engineering Department, which was staffed by Hispanics (mostly Chiricanos and Nicaraguans), staged an unsuccessful work stoppage ignored by the Guaymí laborers on the farms. It is impossible to know to what extent the 1960 strike was a spontaneous response to unsatisfactory working conditions or a carefully planned political undertaking. Accounts by Guaymí sympathetic to the strike⁴ (cf. Palacios et al. 1974) claimed that there had been extensive clandestine preparations. In the Armuelles Division where the strike extended to the following month, a multi-ethnic leadership was elected during secret midnight meetings in the banana groves (ibid.). Company officials and non-Amerindians hostile to the union movement, however, dismissed the explosive events of November and December 1960 as an aberration caused by the "virus of communism." The possibility that formerly "docile" Guaymí were capable of mobilizing their potential as an organized mass of laborers (even if only for a few brief weeks) was profoundly threatening to management. Even at the time of my fieldwork management found it safest to dismiss the strike as a case of cynical, skillful *fidelist* (Cuban) manipulation of "ignorant, capricious *cholos*." At the time of the strike, company officials were so racist that they automatically subscribed to the "conspiracy theory" interpretation of the Guaymí-dominated movement: "It strikes me as very suspicious that the Guaymí Indians should be able to organize a strike, and be able to formulate demands which appear totally out of reality with the true needs of these Indians" (BDA: López to Miller, Nov. 12, 1960).

However, the leadership of the strike's "central committee" in Bocas was multi-ethnic. In addition to three Guaymí leaders, there were a Kuna, a black, and several Hispanics. The charismatic leader who most galvanized Guaymí support, however, was an upper-class Hispanic, Virgilio Schuverer, a former management-level company official. Because of his charismatic personality and oratory skills, Schuverer became the central figure in the strike and the personal leader of the Guaymí. According to eyewitness reports, Guaymí support for Schuverer bordered on religious faith. One can discern here elements of Guaymí internalized racism. Overnight, Schuverer became a great

white leader promising to lead the Amerindians to justice and redemption. The strike was a cathartic experience. It metamorphosed the formerly complacent, timid Guaymí labor force into a politically mobilized and unified group. Earlier influential leaders representing the former status quo were almost violently rejected. This was the case, for example, with Reverend Pascal (see chapter 8), who was forcibly run out of the province by an angry mob of Guaymí strikers:

I was present at the 1960 strike and the U.F.Co invited me to advise the Indians not to leave the farms. . . . When I was on the *tribuna* [platform] speaking, the leftist leader [Schuverer] came and would have had me lynched by their group but for the immediate intervention of the police who knew me as a man of peace and gave me police protection until I boarded [the] plane back to Panama city. . . . The leftists effectively embittered the mind of the Guaymies . . . embittered by their ideologies of hate. (Personal letter from Reverend Pascal, Dec. 30, 1983)

The transformation in authority roles is almost humorously conveyed in the following report by a company official who was "assaulted" by his Amerindian servant for "expressing disrespect" for Schuverer: "The Indian yardboy . . . who had been mine until three days into the strike . . . charged at me angrily shouting, 'Aren't you afraid of S[c]huverer' and I told him that I was not afraid of him. He threw down the rake he had in his hand jumped on a bicycle heading towards the Strike Committee headquarters . . . falsely informing Mr. S[c]huverer on me" (BDA: Wells to Cantrell, Dec. 5, 1960). It must have been disconcerting to the North American managers to be "angrily shouted at" by their formerly obsequious Guaymí servants for inadvertently slighting their leaders. At the same time, the strike imbued the Guaymí, who had hitherto stoically endured racial prejudice and economic exploitation for so many years, with a sense of exhilaration as they rose up and sometimes violently asserted their dignity and power over their former bosses. Such is the uniquely explosive nature of a people who suffer from the conjugation of economic exploitation and racial domination (cf. Fanon 1961).

Hispanic veterans of this period recollected with awe Schuverer's exhortations to "great masses" of "barefoot Guaymí" to seize company installations.⁷ For example, Rodrigo Santos, a Hispanic who was elected to the first union board and who was not normally sympathetic to the Guaymí as a people, spoke with genuine respect of their behavior during the 1960 strike: "When those people decide to be united, they all move together and nothing can stop them. They were firm, the firmest. They all signed up for the union and collected money for Schuverer; they were the strongest supporters of Schuverer."

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE STRIKE MOVEMENT?

The company reacted to the strike with massive firings. Rodrigo Santos claimed that 2,000 workers, primarily Amerindians, were fired during the first week: "The company was doing a little study in psychology to see if they could break the organizers and the new union movement by firing everyone."⁶ In the midst of its negotiations with the strike's central committee, for example, the company fired an additional 500 workers and began deporting foreigners, most of whom were Hispanics from Nicaragua and Honduras (see chapter 13). The company also introduced technological innovations into the production process in order to reduce its dependence on Amerindian labor.⁷

Under this mounting pressure, a preliminary agreement supervised by the government was signed on November 20 between the company and the Bocas Division strike committee. In addition to raising the wage to thirty-five cents an hour, the company promised to respect the results of a union election scheduled for February 26, 1961, three months hence. Following the signing of the agreement, however, according to Rodrigo, the company systematized its network of informants, nicknamed "ears [*orejas*]" or "toads [*sapos*]" by the workers. Anyone suspected of being a "Schuverista" was summarily fired. Rodrigo, who canvassed door to door during this period, told me that the Guaymí signed up for the election in the greatest numbers; they were the only workers willing to risk being fired for remaining publicly supportive of Schuverer. Anthropologist Ricardo Fallas (1979: 33–34) has suggested that the Guaymí's greater militancy during this strike was conditioned both by their ethnic solidarity (which afforded them a heightened sense of unity in action) and also by the security offered to them by their access to land in their home communities should they be fired and black-listed by the transnational. The Hispanic and black workers, on the other hand, according to Rodrigo's version, were so frightened of losing their jobs that they did not even sign up to vote in the February 1961 elections, let alone talk to known Schuveristas in public.

The continued militancy of the Guaymí Schuveristas cost them their jobs. They were replaced by new Amerindian workers "fresh from the mountains."⁸ Even as late as 1965, there were still only approximately 500 Guaymí workers in the Bocas Division, and most of them were temporary laborers who stayed for only a few months (Young 1978: 101). It was not until the early 1970s, when the Hispanic labor force was becoming increasingly militant, that the company once again began employing Guaymí in large numbers.⁹

The resumption of work on the farms during the three-month in-

terim before the union elections marked the disintegration of the unity of the strike movement. Because many personality clashes and extensive personal politicking were involved, I was unable to collect a definitive account of exactly who succumbed to the company's maneuvers and for what reasons.¹⁰ Nevertheless, none of the top leaders of the 1960 strike—not even Schuverer—was on good terms with the militant trade union movement in Panama at the time of my fieldwork. Company correspondence from the period reveals that management made a concerted attempt to separate the Guaymí from Schuverer, the most militant member of the central committee. The division manager sent headquarters a newspaper clipping about the result of a wharf strike during this period and attached a penned note: "You will notice this article gives credit to indian [*sic*] labor leaders Antonio Nuñez and Antonio Quintero for the signing of the wharf contract, which is very desirable in order to weaken Schuverer's position before the labor group" (BDA: Loose newspaper clipping, date and title not available).

Quintero was a Guaymí and Nuñez a Kuna. The division manager, therefore, was reporting to his superiors the details of his strategy of dividing the labor movement via ethnic antagonisms. In the case of this wharf strike, management remained intransigent with the militant leadership while acceding to the faction it considered to be most pliable, or at least the "lesser of two evils."¹¹ By the time of my fieldwork the company had institutionalized its support for the promanagement labor unions affiliated internationally with the ORIT and the ICSU (see chapter 1). The manager of the Bocas Division explained to me: "We like to make the responsible leadership look good, and we give in to their demands every now and then. Sometimes I think we really give them more than they deserve."

In the three months before the elections, consequently, the company was successful in dividing the strike committee along ethnic and political lines. It accused Schuverer of being a "communist agent of Fidel Castro," and pitted Amerindians against Hispanics. The one black member of the strike committee was terrorized into making media declarations. He wrote an open letter to the president of the republic, apologizing for his strike activities and denouncing Schuverer as "unpatriotic." He closed his letter pathetically: "And I only ask of you, Mr. President, the necessary protection so that the Chiriqui Land Company does not take retaliatory measures against me along the lines of firing me from my position which for over six years I have dutifully held" (*El Día*, Jan. 13, 1961: 2). By January 9, according to the confidential report of a company informant who attended secret meetings of the militant faction of the strike committee, Schuverer was complaining that

"the Indians have partially sold out" (BDA: Smith to Cantrell, Jan. 9, 1961). One month later, following the elections, Schuverer accused the newly elected union officers of being traitors. The company never reinstated him or four other leaders in their jobs whereas almost all of the other fired strike leaders were hired back. Subsequently, in the 1964 elections for legislative representative from Bocas del Toro Province, the Guaymí, as Rodrigo described it, "proved their loyalty to Schuverer" by overwhelmingly voting for him on the Communist party ballot. His running mate on the winning ticket was a Guaymí.

Despite Schuverer's election, the local labor movement fragmented.¹² The Hispanic workers, because of their literacy and superior language skills, and because of their greater experience with political maneuvering, dominated the new union. For example, a rule requiring all union representatives to have a primary school education barred Amerindian workers from becoming labor leaders since virtually no Guaymí had any formal schooling whatsoever at this time. The previous patterns of racist interaction in social and interpersonal relations, as well as the apartheid hierarchy in labor relations returned. The Guaymí continued to staff the most unpleasant, poorly remunerated tasks. Hispanic and black workers, even those active in the newly recognized union movement, continued to discriminate against the indigenous workforce. Conversely, the Guaymí remained hostile and closed to non-Amerindians.

Personality conflicts and "betrayals" played an important role in the disintegration of the new union movement, highlighting the fragility of a movement based on charismatic leadership. Explosive mobilizations followed by radical demobilizations have been a pattern among the Guaymí, reflecting their structural vulnerability and dependence on intermediaries. The inability of the Guaymí to pressure effectively for their rights because of their inexperience with the outside world, coupled with their deep-felt desire to change the status quo, rendered charismatic leaders who promised sweeping changes particularly attractive. Management, aware of the importance of intermediaries and leaders among the Guaymí in the plantation setting, has taken full advantage of this knowledge (see chapter 8). In fact the Bocas division manager told me he had carefully "cultivated responsible Indian leaders" because of the Guaymí people's "susceptibility to leadership, both good and bad."

A recent example of the dramatic mobilization of the Guaymí around a charismatic leader was their virtually unconditional support for Dr. Arnulfo Arias, the opposition party candidate in the 1984 presidential elections. Ironically, Arias, a rightist politically, was known for having been virulently racist during World War II. In 1941, when he won the

presidency, he campaigned on an antiblack platform and codified laws that denied the nationality status of 20,000 of the 50,000 Panamanians of West Indian descent residing in the country (Conniff 1983:11). Nevertheless, in his 1984 presidential campaign, because of his rhetorical style against the government and the military, Arias struck a responsive chord among the thousands of plantation Guaymí dissatisfied with their condition as second-class citizens. He symbolized Amerindian desires for a radical transformation of the status quo and most Guaymí voted for him. Although the majority of blacks and Hispanics in Bocas Province also backed Arias, Guaymí support was qualitatively different; the Amerindians treated him almost as a savior. When Arias lost the national election by a small margin, the Guaymí workers staged a fourteen-day spontaneous strike on June 15, 1984, to protest alleged fraud. As in 1960, the Guaymí were the backbone of this 1984 labor stoppage. The strike was especially impressive from a political perspective as there were no economic demands, and it did not have the support of the Guaymí-led (but management-controlled) union.

THE MAMACHI RELIGION

An even more dramatic illustration of the emotional, ideological desire of the Guaymí people for social redress is the Mamachí religious movement, a millenarian cult that swept Guaymí territory in the early 1960s. The Mamachí cult began in September 1961, when a Guaymí woman saw visions of the blessed Virgin promising the immanent beatification and enrichment of all faithful Guaymí within four years. Mamachí leaders advocated total isolation from non-Amerindians and militantly promoted the resurgence of traditional Guaymí culture: "The Latins were seen as those responsible for all the evil and disgraces that had befallen Guaymí society; withdrawal from contact with them was the path to redemption" (Young 1978:57). The more radical Mamachí leaders advocated the destruction of cattle and pigs on the grounds that they were "Spanish" impositions that obliged traditional communities to use fences and to accept Western definitions of private property. According to the preachers, if all the Guaymí people followed the sacred teachings, great disasters would befall the white race (Hispanics) and great riches would be showered on the Guaymí, who had suddenly become God's "chosen people." "Banks" were even built in isolated villages in 1964 to store the formidable wealth scheduled to arrive the following year.

Apparently almost all Amerindians became believers in the Mamachí virtually overnight. According to Young, in the early 1960s, "every Guaymí on and off the reservation became involved [with Mamachí] in

one way or another, or at the very least was influenced by the doctrine" (1978:213). An index of Guaymí respect for Mamachí was the 75 percent absenteeism from schools in the Guaymí villages in Chiriquí Province in 1963-64 (*ibid.*: 56).

Significantly, the cult was infused with a nationalist political tone. Mamachí became a vehicle for demanding recognition of the right of the Guaymí people to political and territorial autonomy (Martínez 1973a: 28). Mamachí unleashed a powerful Amerindian nationalist sentiment latent in the Guaymí ethnic identity. In fact, the Guaymí chose a king, designed a flag, and wrote a constitution (Young 1978:223).¹¹

During my fieldwork, the influence of Mamachí was minimal. In a few communities the religion still persisted but with none of its former strength or pretensions. Once again, as in the case of the 1960 strike, the dramatic rise and fall of such a radical religious cult must be understood in the context of the conjugated class/ethnic oppression weighing upon the Guaymí. It is the dual nature of Guaymí oppression, and more specifically the dimension of internalized racism, that renders an explosive phenomenon possible. A Manichean inversion takes place as self-hate becomes self-adulation; deference to the dominant culture becomes abhorrence of the nontraditional. Among oppressed ethnic groups throughout the world there have been numerous comparable movements, such as the Ghost Dance among North American Indians in the 1870s and 1890s (Barber 1958), the cargo cults of the Melanesian islands (Worsely 1968), and Marcus Garvey's "back to Africa" movement among Afro-Americans and Afro-Caribbeans in the 1920s (Hill 1983).¹² These movements unleash energies that have been charged by decades, or even centuries, of oppression and alienation.

THE CONTEMPORARY UNION MOVEMENT

Dual oppression has continued to mediate Guaymí participation in the union movement. The Hispanic leaders of the independent union movement during the 1960s and 1970s failed to understand this phenomenon. Although they militantly defended the class and economic interests of their constituents, they failed to include Guaymí individuals in leadership positions. Most important, they did not understand that racism is an issue of fundamental concern to banana workers. Instead, they subordinated ethnicity to class and failed to tap the explosive energy latent within the majority of the Guaymí labor force.

Management, on the other hand, recognized the divisive potential of an ethnically diverse labor force and began importing Amerindians in the late 1960s from the more remote regions of the upper Cricamola

Valley in an effort to undermine the radical tendencies within the labor movement. By the early 1970s, the Guaymí, once again, represented a plurality of the labor force and an alternative union movement emerged in which Amerindians figured prominently in leadership positions. In 1970 they ousted the Hispanic-led, class-oriented union leadership.¹⁵ Guaymí leaders who were subservient to the transnational but advocated minimal Amerindian rights replaced them.

At the time of my fieldwork it was impossible for a slate to win unless it was headed by a Guaymí because the Guaymí represented over 42 percent of the eligible voters.¹⁶ The Guaymí-dominated union movement was affiliated internationally with the ORIT and the ICSU and was staunchly promanagement (see chapter 1). It received funding and advice from the American Institute for Free Labor Development (AIFLD) and its ideological orientation was virulently anticommunist. Relations between the Guaymí union leaders and management were based on cooperation rather than confrontation. In fact, the executive vice-president of United Brands at the transnational's headquarters in New York City told me that the Guaymí-dominated union in Bocas was "very very cooperative." Similarly, the manager of the Bocas Division said he was "pleased with the current union leadership," that it was composed of "responsible Indian leaders promoted by us." Indeed, the Guaymí-led union is openly subservient to the company. It even renounced its right to strike in the first collective bargaining contract it negotiated. During my fieldwork, the secretary general was an employee of the company's Labor Relations Department and it was rumored that he had amassed a personal fortune from company kickbacks during his tenure.

Amerindian workers, who were aware that the ORIT-affiliated union did not pressure effectively for their economic interests, tempered their criticism with the comment "but at least our people are the leaders." Ethnic polarization was so profound on the plantation that Guaymí workers preferred "one of their own kind" as head of the union at all costs; they refused to vote for Hispanic or black leaders. The intensity of the racism and cultural humiliation directed against the Guaymí has rendered economic issues secondary. Above all, Guaymí workers wanted Amerindian leaders to be prominently displayed in positions of power superior to Hispanics and blacks.

The strike of 1979 best illustrates the level of polarization of the ethnic-based union movement. The supporters of the militant union movement declared a strike when the Guaymí-dominated, promanagement slate was declared winner of a close election. The farms were paralyzed for several days, and pitched battles broke out between Hispanics and Amerindians supporting their respective slates. Instead of calling in

the security forces to reinstate the union board favorable to it, the transnational let the workers fight among themselves and fanned their inter-ethnic hatreds. Guaymí participants described the 1979 confrontation to me in strictly ethnic terms: "We won the elections and the Hispanics tried to keep us out of power," citing that the losing slate was headed by a Hispanic whereas theirs was led by a Guaymí. They rarely analyzed the relative benefits of the two rival union movements from a class or even an economic perspective.

Not all Guaymí subscribed to a rigidly ethnocentric interpretation of their interests as banana workers. In fact, two cohorts were supportive of the militant, Hispanic-dominated labor movement: the elderly who had worked on the plantation for ten or more years, and the young who were born or raised on the plantation.¹⁷ Because of their greater familiarity with plantation society, these two groups evaluated their problems in terms of their class interests. They were aware of the economic details at stake in the collective conventions negotiated by the union, and they adopted a pragmatic, economic attitude. Furthermore, because of the many years they had spent in a non-Amerindian context, they were no longer intimidated by the racism directed against them. I frequently saw elderly Guaymí joking about, or actually inverting, the racist slurs that Hispanics or blacks directed against them. An elderly Guaymí worker told me that racism against his people continued because the newly arrived Amerindians "let the Hispanics get away with their insults" instead of "giving it back to them." Significantly, the more experienced Guaymí occupied the softer jobs in the packing plants or on the railroad.¹⁸ Nevertheless they were the exception; most Guaymí accepted as a matter of common sense that the militant union movement (and the Communist party) was the exclusive domain of "racist Spaniards [*castellanos*]."

Management in Bocas took credit for fomenting the ethnic polarization between Hispanics and Amerindians. On several occasions I documented specific manipulative strategies by the transnational to polarize the labor force. For example, a labor recruiter told me that the division manager had commissioned him to recruit Costa Rican Amerindians to solve the Sixaola District's labor shortage problem in 1981 when the Guaymí ceased working on the Costa Rican side of the division because of the exchange rate fluctuations (see the preceding chapter). Since the Bribri were not interested in wage work, he went all the way to the Cabécar Indian Reservation of Uirrá in Puntarenas Province on the Pacific Coast watershed. He explained that the manager had wanted to "set up a system like the company got with the *cholos* in Panama." The Cabécar, however, had access to land and markets on their Reser-

vation. As had the Bribri and the Costa Rican Hispanics who were imported before them, they rejected the poor working conditions and low wages they encountered in Sixaola. Nevertheless, the manager was so intent on recreating the success the Bocas Division had had in integrating Amerindians into the labor force during the 1950s and 1960s that he sent the labor contractor back to the Ujarrás Reservation five more times to bring additional Cabécars to Sixaola. He even arranged for the recruitment of high school-educated Cabécars in the hope of establishing a network of indigenous intermediaries and recruiters along the model used for the Guaymí and the Kuna (see the following chapter).

On a more informal level, management frequently fanned racist antagonisms against the Guaymí during moments of labor crisis. I witnessed this manipulation on several occasions among the Hispanic workers in the Sixaola District, on the Costa Rican side of the border. For example, about halfway through my fieldwork, a work stoppage occurred in one of the Costa Rican packing plants when the company changed the system for packing bananas. The workers complained that the new technique was too complicated and demanded a hike in the piece-rate payment. A company official arrived on the scene and succeeded in persuading the laborers to return to their tasks by ridiculing the Guaymí packers, on the other side of the border, who had accepted the changed technique without complaint: "How is it possible that the *cholos* who don't even know how to read and write, and who you have to explain things to over and over—four times over four days in a row—and who are always answering yes, yes, yes [mimics obsequious style] without knowing what the hell you're talking about, can pack this way and do it better than you?" He then expanded on the "stupidity of the Guaymí," successfully changing the subject to a safe domain.

A few weeks later, the same packing plant staged a work slowdown to pressure, once again, for a raise in piecework payments. The superintendent of the Sixaola District met with the workers and, once again, he steered the conversation away from their concrete economic demands and onto the subject of the *cholos*. His derogatory comments about the Amerindians elicited roars of laughter, changing the atmosphere from one of confrontation to comedy. The workers were so distracted by the company official's anecdotes on the Guaymí that they began asking questions about the Amerindians: "Is it really true that *cholos* don't let their women out of the house? Do they really file their teeth in order to eat raw meat?" and so on. The superintendent then offered to take six packers across the border in his pickup truck to "see the *cholos* at work." The union shop steward was one of the packers selected for the trip. She actually jumped up and down with excite-

ment, completely forgetting about the demands for higher piecework rates. The company official ended the meeting by saying he could not raise the value of the piece rates because "you people are worse than *cholos*. As soon as you have enough money you'll stop working. The more you earn, the less hours you'll put in, and the more time you'll spend drunk." The workers, once again, broke into laughter and began chanting: "We're not *cholos*. We're no *cholos*." The atmosphere, however, had successfully been defused and the slowdown ended without the company having to raise the piece-rate payments.

The most dramatic example of management's manipulation of Guaymí ethnicity during my fieldwork occurred in the union elections of February 1983. Shortly before the election, the company printed flyers on red paper (the militant slate's campaign colors) urging the workers not to vote for the white slate (the promanagement's colors) on the grounds that "they are ignorant Indians." Company employees slipped these counterfeit flyers under the doors of the houses of Amerindian workers. Not surprisingly, upon reading (or being read) the insulting flyers, the overwhelming majority of the Guaymí workers voted against the militant union slate. To management's delight, the white slate swept the election by one of the largest margins in the history of the Bocas Division—2,413 votes to 1,598.

It was probably not necessary for the company to have engaged in such a manipulative ploy to ensure the victory of the promanagement Amerindian slate. Polarization along ethnic lines was sufficient to ensure a voting pattern favorable to the transnational. Ethnic polarization has established its own momentum, virtually independent of management's machinations. For example, Hispanic laborers, frustrated in their attempts to improve wages through the union, vented their anger against the Amerindians. The following harangue delivered by an elderly Hispanic worker is a typical example of this kind of self-fulfilling ethnic polarization. Although he was acutely aware of the mechanism by which the company had debilitated the union movement, the racist, angry language ensured that the company's tactic would continue to be successful:

The union's been busted 'cause the company used a ploy—and be careful who you repeat this to because in other countries they could do the same thing to bust unions—for every one of their black or Hispanic laborers, the company hired five or ten *cholos*, 'cause the *cholos* are used to eating boiled bananas; they don't spend money. Then every year the company offers its Hispanic workers their severance pay and now the Cricamola Indians are a majority and you can't have a strike 'cause they monopolize all the jobs. Every time there are elections, the *cholos* win 'cause they are the majority.

ELEVEN / Kuna Banana Workers: “Tradition” and Monopoly Capital

The [Kuna] Indians from San Blas give less trouble because they are more civilized and less vice-ridden than the Guaymí.

—Report by a Panamanian Ministry of Labor inspector to his superiors, June 24, 1957

They're cholos but not cholo cholos (*son cholos pero no son cholo cholos*).

—Hispanic banana worker describing the Kuna, 1983

The integration of the Kuna¹ into the plantation labor force contrasts dramatically with that of the Guaymí even though they, too, are a traditional Amerindian people rooted in a largely subsistence agricultural economy with limited access to cash income in an isolated region of Panama. The key to this contrast lies in the manner in which the Kuna have mobilized their traditional institutions and culture to mediate their involvement with the outside labor market. The community-level political systems of the Kuna and the Guaymí are different as are their respective relationships to the Panamanian state and outside corporate entities. The case of the Kuna provides yet another example of how tradition and ethnicity are dynamic, constantly changing phenomena. Cultural forms do not “wither away” or succumb to modernization in a linear manner; on the contrary, they reconstitute themselves and adapt, sometimes explosively, to new political and economic realities. On the one hand, the traditional Kuna political-cultural institutions aided the transnational in its strategy for augmenting labor control through ethnic segmentation. On the other hand, traditional culture has proved an effective means for self-help and protection by Kuna migrants in their sudden immersion into the hostile, unfamiliar, and exploitative setting of the banana plantation. The Kuna have mobilized their ethnicity to

mediate politically and ideologically the non-Amerindian world. The result in concrete terms on the Bocas del Toro plantation is a profoundly different experience of economic exploitation and ideological domination from the rest of the Amerindian labor force.

The Kuna reside in an autonomous political-administrative district reserved for Amerindians known as the *comarca* of San Blas, a territory on the Atlantic Coast of Panama near the frontier with Colombia formed by some dozen mainland communities and an archipelago of several hundred small islands (see map 1). The total Kuna population numbers approximately 30,000 and is divided into small communities practicing slash-and-burn semisubsistence agriculture. Although a coconut export trade with Colombia, and growing tourist and embroidered cloth industries provide considerable income on some of the islands, on the whole, the local economy is depressed. San Blas has relatively few lucrative sources of cash income either through direct employment or via the commercialization of agricultural and artisanal products.

The poverty and relative isolation² of San Blas has obliged thousands of Kuna to emigrate periodically in search of wage work in Panama City and the Canal Zone. The Kuna "expatriate" community is concentrated on eight U.S. military bases and in the low-wage service sector: restaurants, hotels, and household help (Holloman 1969: 116-17, 126-27; Swain 1982: 106-7). Although increasingly protracted in recent years Kuna labor migration has usually not been permanent; most emigrants maintain deeply rooted economic and social attachments to their natal communities. Indeed, as will be shown, the Kuna social system has purposefully institutionalized the phenomenon of labor migration in order to prevent it from destroying the San Blas economy and culture.

Kuna villages are famous in the anthropological literature for being "closed corporate" communities resistant to non-Amerindian penetration (Stout 1947; Howe 1986; Sherzer 1983). Marriage with outsiders is heavily discouraged and until recently was prohibited in most San Blas communities. Non-Amerindian visitors must obtain special permits to stay in Kuna territory for extended visits and most communities do not allow overnight stays. The Kuna are obliged to obtain written permission from their local community leaders in order to travel in search of wage work or even merely to visit a neighboring island within the *comarca* (Costello 1983: 95; Holloman 1975: 37).³ Similarly, institutions have been established among the emigrant Kuna communities outside of San Blas to ensure continued respect for traditional values and structures of leadership. Since the 1970s these institutions have begun issuing "return permits" or reports for Kuna going back to their home

communities in San Blas (personal communication, James Howe, Dec. 29, 1986).

The complex network of ceremony, authority, and administration that governs Kuna society is not a relic from the past. What is today considered traditional Kuna society and ethnicity is, in fact, the product of a process of "internally negotiated change" over the past half century (Holloman 1975:28; see also Falla 1978). The turning point for Kuna adaptation to the exigencies of the modern world occurred in the early 1920s when their leaders, Nele Kantule and Címrál Colman, led a revolt against the Panamanian government, and (with the aid of a warship sent by the United States) managed to negotiate the special status of *comarca* autonomy for San Blas. Since that period, therefore, the closed corporate, quasi-nationalist structures of Kuna society have not only been institutionalized but also been codified by Panamanian law. According to Regina Holloman, "The Cuna Revolt of 1925 had the effect of resetting the economic and political parameters of the Cuna ethnic system" (1975:39).

Nele Kantule promoted the revamping of the complex political structure governing Kuna daily life. Highly traditional customs and institutions were blended and adapted over time, through both a planned and a piecemeal process, to respond to contemporary political, economic, and bureaucratic realities.⁴ Today every Kuna community has a local congress or "gathering" [*onmakket*]; in principle it meets every evening, and is presided over by local leaders and dignitaries (*sahilas*, *argars*, and *suaribedis*). All adult males are expected to attend their community's nightly congresses. The highest institutional authority in Kuna society is the Kuna General Congress, which is convened approximately twice a year and is attended by two to three representatives from each of the San Blas communities, as well as by Panamanian government officials.⁵ The Kuna General Congress has strategically incorporated the hierarchies and power structures encountered in the outside world. For example, representatives from the National Guard, the manager of the Bocas Division, and the heads of all major companies that employ Kuna in large numbers outside the *comarca* (such as the cardboard box plant and the purée plant in Bocas del Toro) are formally invited to attend the Kuna General Congress as honorary observers. Yet the Kuna General Congress celebrates customary practices, including chants and religious ritual. It is presided over by a general secretary and three *caciques* or high chiefs (one from each of the three districts [*corregimientos*] of the San Blas *comarca*). These *caciques* represent the highest echelon of Kuna leadership.

INITIAL INTEGRATION INTO THE PLANTATION
LABOR FORCE

Kuna laborers began working for the United Fruit Company in 1952 when the company established formal contact with Cacique Olotebilibiquiña,⁶ the second of three principal Kuna *caciques* who was delegated to supervise labor migration (personal communication, James Howe, Dec. 29, 1986). Through the intermediary of the U.S. consul in Panama, two Kuna representatives of the *cacique* were sent to inspect working and living conditions in the Bocas Division (BDA: Whittaker to Munch, Jan. 7, 1953).⁷ Upon their return, Cacique Olotebilibiquiña signed an agreement with the transnational approving the arrangements for the first group of twenty-five Kuna men to work for six months in railroad maintenance (BDA: Mais to Munch, Nov. 10, 1952; Richards to Matheis, Nov. 29, 1952). Their contract specified that they were to work nine hours daily for twenty-two cents an hour, and were to receive only half of their pay on the plantation. The remainder of their wages was to be sent in a lump sum to the authorities of San Blas upon the completion of the six-month period (BDA: Richards to Matheis, Nov. 29, 1952).

Although company correspondence from the period refers to the chief as being "very enthusiastic about the possibility of working with us," the *cacique* insisted in the contract on his right to supervise rigidly the conditions of the Kuna migrant laborers. On several occasions, he pressured for better working conditions and higher wages (BDA: Mais to Munch, Nov. 10, 1952). Following the return of the first group of contracted workers in early 1953, Olotebilibiquiña arranged for the U.S. consul to intervene with the company on behalf of the Kuna (BDA: Whittaker to Munch, Jan. 7, 1953). It appears from the extensive correspondence between the transnational and the *cacique* that Olotebilibiquiña was primarily concerned with protecting Kuna culture and with tempering the dislocation Kuna workers (and Kuna society in general) faced because of sudden immersion into full-time agricultural wage work. For example, Kuna workers were forbidden from taking their wives with them to prevent them from becoming too comfortable away from home. They were forbidden to drink alcohol or engage in behavior that might "shame" their people. The *cacique* specified: "I do not wish any of the men that I send with my permission to engage in corrupted behavior. . . . I have to make myself respected. . . . If any worker drinks liquor, he is to be fired from his work and sent immediately to Colón (BDA: Olotebilibiquiña to Munch, May 3, 1954). At Olotebili-

quina's insistence, all the Kuna were to live together in segregated housing and were to work in all-Kuna squads under the direction of a bilingual Kuna foreman (BDA: Richards to Matheis, Nov. 29, 1952). Consequently, all Kuna working for the transnational during the initial years of incorporation (from 1952 through 1960) had to be explicitly approved by the *cacique*, and were subject to his rigid social discipline. Company correspondence reveals that the *cacique's* dictates were enforced. The files contain numerous requests on his part (all of which were respected) to discharge workers about whom he had received reports of "corrupted" behavior (BDA: Richards to Matheis, Nov. 29, 1952; Munch to Linton, June 9, 1954; Smith to Peith, Dec. 2, 1953).

The importance of the *cacique's* mediation during the initial process of incorporation into plantation wage work should not be underestimated. Without his restrictions, the Kuna may very well have been subjected to the excesses suffered by the Guaymí who were also entering the Bocas Division's labor force in large numbers during this same period (see chapters 8 and 9). The twenty-two cents an hour that the company was offering laborers in 1952 appeared highly attractive to the average Kuna semisubsistence agriculturalist. Once the initial contact had been established, therefore, had it not been for the limitations placed on migration by the *cacique*, it is likely that a wave of Kuna would have descended on the plantation. In fact, the company's agent in Panama City noted in 1953: "Ever since the first group of San Blas Indians [have] returned . . . all the men in the various Islands want a chance to go to Almirante but . . . Cacique Olotebilibiquina [is] trying to make it hard" (BDA: Mais to Munch, Sept. 15, 1953). The Kuna General Congress even passed resolutions praising the "admirable attitude" of the United Fruit Company for alleviating the "problem of unemployment" in the San Blas *comarca* (BDA: Resolution of the Kuna General Congress at Mulatupo, July 10, 1954).

The company's historical archives on the Kuna from the 1950s document the dramatically unequal encounter of two extremely unlikely partners—on the one hand, the United Fruit Company, the most advanced representative of monopoly capital in Central America; and, on the other hand, an Amerindian people primarily engaged in subsistence agriculture and with limited literacy and Spanish language skills. In fact, one of the prime motivations for most Kuna men to work on the plantation during the 1950s was to save money for the traditional puberty ceremony of their young daughters. The rites of passage of Kuna girls into adulthood is one of the most important and expensive rituals in Kuna culture (Sherzer 1983:61, 151–53). A father has to sponsor a feast and celebration for his entire community; it is generally the largest

outlay of cash in an individual's life and has great bearing on one's prestige, sense of dignity, and perhaps indirectly even on one's political standing in the community. The ceremony is also a central dynamic in defining and in reasserting the closed corporate boundaries of the traditional community. The six-month labor contracts, therefore, were well suited to anxious Kuna fathers whose daughters were approaching puberty. Six months of hard plantation labor was all they needed in order to save sufficient cash to be able to sponsor an adequate ceremony. Ironically, therefore, the demands and necessities of traditional Kuna culture propelled a significant sector of Kuna men into the wage labor market.

Olotebilibiquiña was negotiating with probably the most sophisticated labor relations management officers operating anywhere in Latin America during the 1950s; nevertheless, he employed strictly formal, traditional vocabulary and expressions. His handwritten letters with a "Comarca San Blas" letterhead were rife with Spanish grammatical errors and simple spelling mistakes. His signature was accompanied by a clumsily inked rubber stamp stating his formal title: "2cnd Cacique, Chief of the San Blas Comarca" (BDA: Olotebilibiquiña to Munch, Sept. 22, 1953; Nov. 30, 1958; Dec. 24, 1958). He referred (in Spanish) to the Kuna workers as "my sons" or "my children" and addressed the manager of the Bocas Division as "My dearest friend": "It has been many months since we exchanged notes on the works in your company. My children constantly remember you and they want to send me over [misspelled in Spanish] to you to see if once again we can arrange like friends their working in your company. . . . I want to spend Christmas eve by the side of my children working in Almirante, if it is acceptable to you" (ibid., Nov. 30, 1958).

The company skillfully accommodated itself to the traditional forms of Kuna discourse and the division manager carefully imitated the traditional Kuna tone and style in his correspondence with the *cacique*. He used the salutation "My dearest friend" and carefully wrote out the *cacique's* formal title; he also referred to the Kuna laborers as "your sons" (BDA: Munch to Olotebilibiquiña, March 5, 1959). With great pomp the company arranged for the *cacique's* visits of inspection to the plantation. Boats and trains were placed at his disposition, and he was given spending money. The manager injected the appropriate personal tone in his letter of invitation: "I am happy at your announcement of intentions to visit and I await with expectation the opportunity to greet you personally upon your arrival to the Province" (BDA: King to Olotebilibiquiña, Aug. 15, 1962). At the same time, however, the company's internal correspondence reveals that this "warm" relationship

with the *cacique* was based on cold calculation: "I realize that it is of extreme importance to have the *cacique* feel that his indians [*sic*] are being well treated" (BDA: Munch to Mais, June 18, 1954).

At one point in 1953, when the relationship with Olotebilibiquiña was still new and the company lacked experience in its dealings with the Kuna, it made an attempt to bypass the *cacique* and hire Kuna in larger numbers through a local leader. This community-level Kuna *sáhila* wrote the company's Labor Relations Department from Colón offering his services as a labor recruiter. He accused Olotebilibiquiña of favoring residents from Ustupo Island and of overcharging on transport costs (BDA: Morris to Mais, Nov. 17, 1953; Mais to Munch, Sept. 15, 1953). Shortly after the company entered into a relationship with this new Kuna labor recruiter the *cacique* discovered what was happening and complained to the manager for his betrayal of the "good friendship which we have had already for nine months" (BDA: Olotebilibiquiña to Munch, Sept. 22, 1953). In the same letter he requested that those Kuna who had come to work on the plantation without his approval be integrated immediately into squads with the other Kuna who had arrived under his previously negotiated agreement (*ibid.*). Company officials realized they had erred in attempting to break traditional etiquette and channels and promptly canceled the alternative arrangement with the Colón-based Kuna labor recruiter (BDA: Mais to Munch Sept. 15, 1953; Nov. 18, 1953). Olotebilibiquiña was retained as the sole intermediary for Kuna labor recruitment until the early 1960s.

The relationship with Olotebilibiquiña was further cemented when a desk job in the Labor Relations Department was given to a man the *cacique* designated as "Representative of the Kuna community in Bocas del Toro Province." So successful was this institutionalization of the relationship with the Kuna that shortly afterward the company on its own initiative created a similar position for the Guaymí (see chapter 8). Indian representatives play key roles in the transnational's strategy for labor control but in the traditional structure of Kuna society the plantation-based representative is roughly equivalent to a community-level *sáhila*. He supervises the affairs of the local Kuna residents and reports back to the periodic Kuna General Congress.

From the company's perspective during the 1950s the highly formalized relationship cultivated between the Labor Relations Department and the Kuna was extremely profitable and beneficial for labor stability. As noted in chapter 1, the 1950s were characterized by an acute labor shortage and by large fluctuations in labor demand, reflecting the experiments with various labor intensive schemes for rehabilitating bananas. The six-month contracts negotiated with the *cacique* allowed

the company to hire and fire relatively large numbers of workers on short notice without having to make severance payments and without having to fear labor protests.

The Kuna contracted through the *cacique* initially arrived in small groups of 25 to 30; by the end of 1956, however 1,092 had passed through Bocas in thirty-nine separate groups for six-month stints. The San Blas Islands, consequently, constituted a convenient reservoir for cheap temporary labor. Furthermore, the strictly limited nature of the contracts freed the company from any responsibility for the long-term reproduction costs of the Kuna labor force. It had no obligation to extend vacation and retirement benefits or to accord severance, accident, and sick pay, all being taken care of by the traditional subsistence economy in San Blas.

The biggest asset of the Kuna from management's perspective was the high level of labor control that could be imposed upon them. Indeed, company officials showed a far greater appreciation for the Kuna than their numbers warranted. For example, in 1954 the manager reported: "The San Blas indians [sic] are practically saving the situation here for us" (BDA: Munch to Mais, June 18, 1954). There was frequent mention of "very good results from the San Blas Indians." The Kuna were lauded for being "well disciplined . . . exceptionally good in railway section gangs," and "quick to learn" (cf. BDA: Mais to Moore, Sept. 23, 1954; Munch to Moore, March 11, 1954). Most important, the Kuna "cause absolutely no trouble"* (BDA: Munch to Moore, March 11, 1954). The six-month contracts also prevented the Kuna from becoming involved in the local labor movement and from developing "union ideas." When I asked a company official how the Kuna had behaved in the 1960 strike he answered: "Oh, we didn't have to worry about them; they were still on six-month contracts and we just sent them home."

Perhaps most extraordinary from management's point of view was the exemplary self-imposed labor discipline of the Kuna under the supervision of the *cacique* and his local representative. Whenever a Kuna proved to be a bad worker or became involved in the union movement, management had only to notify the *cacique* that one of his "children" had "misbehaved." The superintendent of agriculture described to me how easily an undesirable Kuna could be fired: "The *cacique* sits down with the manager and asks, 'How are my children behaving?' And God forbid if you should tell him one of them has misbehaved. He would send him back to San Blas in disgrace [chuckle]." In other words, by carefully respecting traditional Kuna etiquette, the company was able to fire troublesome Kuna whose job tenure might otherwise

have been protected by Panamanian labor laws. The company did not even have to provide full severance pay because when a visiting *cacique* or *sáhila* ordered a worker to return to San Blas, it was registered legally as a voluntary resignation.

In 1954 the company recognized that its relationship to the *cacique* was important enough to grant him a salary of \$100 (\$U.S.) per month to "cover expenses incurred by him in rounding up and sending the laborers to us, as per our orders" (BDA: Munch to Richards, July 28, 1954). During my fieldwork, the company no longer maintained any *caciques* or *sáhilas* on its payroll, but it still paid the expenses of Kuna leaders when they requested permission to inspect working conditions on the plantation approximately once a year. On these occasions the manager had a formal meeting with the visiting *cacique* or *sáhila* and attended to him with great formality. If the *cacique* requested that a Kuna worker be fired, even if the worker had never done anything wrong from the company's perspective, the request was honored.

Another reason the transnational appreciated the Kuna labor force during the 1950s was their usefulness in emergencies to break labor stoppages and walkouts. For example, in 1954, the Kuna who had been contracted to work in railroad maintenance were temporarily transferred to dock work in the port of Almirante in order to break a labor slowdown organized by the predominantly black stevedores who were pressuring for higher piecework payments (BDA: Munch to Moore, Aug. 2, 1954). The Kuna were particularly well suited for labor substitution since they were newcomers on the plantation and had no social ties to the local population. They did not intend to remain in the area for more than six months and, consequently, did not have to worry about future problems with the black workers whose efforts they were undermining. In fact, these Kuna strikebreakers probably did not speak Spanish or English and may not even have known that they were substituting for striking workers. An anthropologist who visited the plantation during this period specifically noted that the Kuna "have little to do with others . . . [and] dislike Negroes" (Gordon 1957: 11).

The institutionalized, "closed corporate" form of integration of the Kuna into the plantation labor force began to break down in the 1960s when the company's labor needs dramatically changed with the substitution of Gros Michel bananas by the new disease-resistant variety of bananas known as Valerie (see chapter 1). With the introduction of packing plants and more intensive cultivation techniques the transnational required a stabler labor force. It was not economical to train a worker in the techniques of packing or cultivating bananas if that worker was going to abandon plantation work in only six months. Not

surprisingly, therefore, the six-month contract system of labor recruitment presided over by the *cacique* ended in the early 1960s and Kuna workers began arriving in Bocas on their own and staying for longer periods.

LOCATION IN THE CLASS/ETHNIC HIERARCHY

The technological and ecological transformation in the labor process brought on by the introduction of Valerie bananas in the early 1960s enabled the Kuna to move marginally upward in the plantation's labor hierarchy. In 1952, when they first arrived, the Kuna had been employed solely in the low-status menial jobs such as railroad maintenance or as shovelers on the banana rehabilitation projects.⁹ In the early 1960s, however, increasing numbers were transferred into the packing plants or into specialized tasks in the fields such as bagging banana bunches before they mature. During my fieldwork, few Kuna still worked in the fields; almost all were either in the packing plants or in service positions (messengers, chauffeurs, night watchmen, club bartenders, etc.).¹⁰ Foremen and supervisors praised the Kuna for being "clean, honest, polite, reliable, quick to learn, and skillful with their hands"; they criticized them, however, for being "useless for heavy work."

The company assigned the Kuna to a few selected low-prestige tasks that required team work and were in some way crucial. Most notably, the flag bearers for the airplanes that sprayed pesticides to control black sigatoka were primarily Kuna. During my fieldwork, the company was negotiating with the local Kuna leader about the possibility of phasing out the Guaymí flag bearers and replacing them exclusively with Kuna on condition that they commit themselves to remaining on the plantation for a longer period. I was told that the Guaymí were too unreliable for this important task as "they are always going off on binges and missing work." Hispanics, of course, were not willing to work as flag bearers because it involved prolonged exposure to heavy concentrations of pesticides (see chapter 9).

The majority of the banana peelers in the purée plant in which over-ripe bananas are converted into mash for further processing into baby food were also Kuna. Peeling is low-prestige assembly-line work requiring team cooperation and reliability. In the company's only other purée plant, located in Honduras (where there are no Amerindians in the labor force), peeling is performed exclusively by women—a clear indication of its low status. One of the reasons the company relegated the task of peeling to the Kuna (or to women in the case of the Honduras sub-

siary) is that it is vulnerable to effective work stoppages. A strike by the peelers can paralyze hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of machinery.

The Kuna were underrepresented in administrative positions on the plantation. For example, according to the February 1983 labor roster, although the Kuna comprised 6 percent of the day laborers on the plantation, they constituted only 1.2 percent of the monthly employees and only one Kuna earned over \$500 [\$U.S.] per month (see figures 2 and 3). Significantly, this one Kuna employee was a woman and had been ostracized by the rest of the Kuna community on the plantation.¹¹ There was only one Kuna foreman and he supervised the pesticide flagmen. Similarly on the state-owned, COBANA farms where the Kuna represented just under 6 percent of the labor force, none was a foreman (see figure 4.) Typically, however, the manager's "messenger boy" was Kuna. Outside of the banana industry, the Kuna in Bocas del Toro were employed as cooks and house cleaners, and as orderlies in the state-run hospital.¹² In summary, therefore, the Kuna were above the Guaymí in the local occupational hierarchy but below blacks and Hispanics. They occupied softer positions among the low-prestige jobs, and were concentrated in service positions involving prolonged personal contact with their employers.

The distribution of Kuna in the Bocas labor force followed a distinct pattern based upon their community of origin. Elderly Kuna workers told me that fewer Amerindians had been coming to Bocas del Toro from San Blas in search of jobs over the past ten years. Young Kuna men increasingly tended to migrate to the capital or to the U.S. military bases in the Canal Zone where they were better paid and where they worked in the less strenuous service sector. Indeed, in 1983 approximately 300 Kuna worked in the Bocas Division, whereas in the late 1960s and early 1970s there had been between 700 and 1,000 Kuna. The Kuna migrating to Bocas during my fieldwork were from the Cartí sector islands of the San Blas Archipelago, which tend to be land-poor (personal communication, James Howe, Dec. 29, 1986). None were from the "wealthier" islands, such as Narganá, Corazón de Jesús, or Río Azúcar, where the local population had access to alternative sources of income both at home and in urban Panama. The Kuna, therefore, fit into the classic ethnic-blind pattern of vulnerability to exploitation: the more limited the alternative sources of cash income in the worker's region of origin, the more exploitable that worker will be.

The most dramatic advantage the Kuna derived from mobilizing the institutions of their traditional culture was not upward mobility within the local occupational hierarchy but rather a superior ranking vis-à-vis

other Amerindian peoples—namely, the Guaymí—in the local structure of ethnic stratification. The Kuna have managed to overcome the discrimination directed against Amerindians by Hispanic and black society by accentuating their “Indianness” rather than by minimizing it. They segregated themselves as much as possible from the rest of the workforce and proudly maintained their traditional forms of behavior and expression. They were not caught in the contradictory role of simultaneously emulating and rejecting the dominant culture, behavior especially true for the women who have been arriving on the plantation in increasing numbers since the 1960s.¹³ Kuna women continued to wear full traditional dress in Bocas del Toro, including a nose ring, bracelets, anklets, gold necklaces, a headdress, and brightly patterned clothing adorned with *molas*, a form of Kuna embroidery. These traditionally attired women did not hesitate to approach foreigners in order to sell artisanal cloth and *molas*. Many were even adept in the art of bargaining and overcharging unsuspecting clients.¹⁴

The vitality of traditional Kuna politics and culture was the main advantage the Kuna migrants to Bocas del Toro held over the Guaymí. Otherwise, they too were poor, subsistence agriculturalists, who were largely monolingual and had only a limited experience with capitalist relations. Nevertheless, they were successful in resisting the racism directed against Amerindians by Panamanian society. Their traditional institutions enabled them not only to defend their concrete economic and political interests but also to maintain a powerful sense of cultural solidarity and pride. As mentioned earlier, Olotebilibiquiña’s restrictions on migration to the plantation in the 1950s protected the Kuna from the more extreme levels of exploitation the Guaymí were subjected to during the same period. The most important aspect of the *cacique*’s mediation, however, was to maintain his people’s sense of ethnic self-respect despite their lack of skills and preparation for dealing with non-Amerindian plantation society.

The Kuna have recreated a microcosm on the plantation of their tightly knit closed corporate society. They were subject to rigid standards of social control. During my fieldwork, the *cacique* ordered a Kuna worker sent back to San Blas in disgrace for cohabiting with a Guaymí woman. They were forbidden from being publicly self-destructive; they did not engage in prolonged drunken binges or fights. This kind of “cultural supervision” provided Kuna migrant workers and their families with a support network, both psychological and economic, which enabled them to resist internalizing the racism directed against Amerindians by Panamanian society. Unlike the Guaymí who avoided non-Amerindian stares in public, the Kuna exchanged greet-

ings with non-Kuna on their way to and from work. In blatant contrast to the Guaymí, therefore, they did not openly manifest the characteristics of a people overwhelmed by ethnic discrimination and economic exploitation, such as defensive hostility, public drunkenness, suicide, and so on. In some ways they presented themselves as a "model people" to the other ethnic groups on the plantation.¹⁵ Under the supervision of their local leaders they maintained their segregated dormitories and houses conspicuously clean, neat, and freshly painted.

Even in 1954 when the Kuna were a complete novelty in Bocas Province and could have easily been the brunt of racist ridicule by the predominantly Hispanic and black labor force, they were, according to a visiting anthropologist, "respected" for being "severely disciplined under their own leaders" (Gordon 1957: 11). They could not have presented a greater contrast, therefore, to the newly arrived Guaymí who were in the throes of a traumatic transition to wage labor. Indeed, the same Hispanic or black individual who unhesitatingly proclaimed the racial inferiority of the Guaymí in the same breath would praise the Kuna for being "clean and civilized." On several occasions I was warned not to confuse the Kuna "who look like *cholos*" with the Guaymí "who are real *cholos*, of a lower cultural level." Similarly, even prostitutes in the local brothel who did not serve Guaymí on the grounds that they were dirty and inferior spoke favorably of the Kuna. They noted that the Kuna never "get too drunk," and "always take care of one another" when in trouble. The Kuna, for example, never left behind a drunk companion in the gutter and never fought in public.

THE REASSERTION OF TRADITION: UTRAKUNA

The Kuna have maintained their privileged position within the ethnic hierarchy in Bocas by adapting their traditional institutions to the realities of plantation wage work. They did so especially during the 1960s, when the *cacique* appeared to have lost control over the increasingly large wave of Kuna laborers migrating with their families and children to the plantation; the formal organization that once supervised them had broken down. In the words of an elderly Amerindian laborer, "It got so bad that we lived all dispersed, one separate from the other, like Hispanics! Just imagine!" In San Blas as well, the traditional structures of Kuna society were seriously strained in the 1960s in part because of this large-scale, uncontrolled emigration. Increasing numbers of young men were leaving San Blas in search of cash income for long periods, whether in Bocas del Toro or the Canal Zone. Finally in the early 1970s, Cacique Estanislao López, the successor of Olotebiliquiña for labor mi-

gration supervision, revitalized the controls on Kuna emigration. He reaffirmed the obligation of his people to carry "passports," which they had to present in order to leave their home communities; most important, he encouraged all the Kuna laborers outside the *comarca* to organize themselves into local associations whose leaders were to report annually to the Kuna General Congress. As a consequence the Kuna workers in Bocas founded a new organization called UTRAKUNA. The same individual who had been hired by the transnational as Kuna Representative in Bocas del Toro at Olotebilibiquiña's insistence in 1954 was made president. The Panamanian government granted UTRAKUNA legal recognition in 1972. It is basically a mutual aid organization, except that all Kuna in Bocas del Toro were obliged to be members on pain of social ostracism. Employers deducted membership dues (two dollars per month) from Kuna paychecks and deposited them directly into UTRAKUNA's bank account. A portion of these funds was saved to care for Kuna caught in emergencies in Bocas, and the remainder was invested in development projects in the *comarca*.¹⁶

Most important, UTRAKUNA affirms the sense of common Amerindian identity and solidarity among Kuna banana workers by its periodic meetings, not unsimilar to the nightly gatherings [*onmakket*] held in most San Blas communities. In this manner, the social control that diminished during the 1960s has been reasserted. An index of the level of social control UTRAKUNA has been able to establish in Bocas is that all the major employers in the region have agreed to hire only those Kuna who bear a letter of introduction from one of their island *sáhilas* or from the president of UTRAKUNA.

UTRAKUNA itself has had to adapt to changing political and economic realities, bureaucratizing the selection process for leadership. During my fieldwork, for the first time the leader of UTRAKUNA was selected by election rather than by consensus, and he was granted a two-year term. Perhaps even more significantly, UTRAKUNA has been forced to accommodate to class differentiation within the Kuna community. For example, a Kuna woman who worked as an accountant in the transnational's Comptroller's Office was summoned to an UTRAKUNA meeting and reprimanded for allowing a North American (the son of the division manager) to court her. The woman protested, claiming that as a professional worker she was not subject to UTRAKUNA's scrutiny since she had obtained her job on the basis of her educational status and had not relied on a recommendation from either UTRAKUNA or a *sáhila* from her home community. Her case was brought to the attention of one of the *caciques* in San Blas who ruled in her favor, and formally reassured the transnational on his subsequent visit that

"professionals" could be hired in the future without prior consultation with local Kuna authorities.

The control UTRAKUNA exerted over the Kuna labor force provided it with a heightened bargaining power vis-à-vis the transnational as well as with the government authorities in Bocas del Toro Province. Because they presented a united front the Kuna were able to demand special favors, ranging from minor fringe benefits to major expenditures. For example, during my fieldwork, UTRAKUNA arranged for (1) a free set of dominoes for the Kuna clubroom, (2) the construction of new outdoor kitchens in selected Kuna dormitories, and (3) the budgeting of an entire new dormitory reserved for single Kuna men in the following year's construction plans.

On a long-term structural level, UTRAKUNA has obtained preferential hiring practices for Kuna immigrants. The newly elected president of UTRAKUNA described to me his relationship with management in strictly utilitarian terms. He presented me with the example of a Kuna worker who, because of a computer error, was overpaid \$4,000 and immediately resigned and returned to San Blas with the money. When the company discovered its error, it notified the president of UTRAKUNA, who recalled the worker from San Blas, obliging him to reimburse the \$4,000. The head of UTRAKUNA explained that he had prevailed upon the worker to return the money in order to protect the strategic, long-term interests of the Kuna people: "Now the company owes me some favors; I can guarantee jobs for my people. We get a good name."

UTRAKUNA engaged in bargaining with other institutions in Bocas del Toro as well, such as the National Guard, which had agreed not to imprison or abuse any Kuna even when they had violated the law. When Kuna were arrested on the plantation, they were not subjected to legal prosecution; instead, they were immediately handed over to UTRAKUNA. If the violation was serious the guilty Kuna were sent back to San Blas for punishment. This preferential legal agreement between the Kuna and the National Guard contrasts dramatically with the kind of treatment the Guaymí received from the authorities when they violated the law. As described in chapter 9, Guaymí arrested for even marginal infractions, such as disorderly conduct, were publicly ridiculed and obliged to work in the hot sun.

From the company's perspective, preferential access to employment for the Kuna in soft day-labor tasks was a small price to pay in return for the guarantee of a disciplined, predictable, self-contained body of laborers who were resistant to the vices of alcoholism and absenteeism, and who shunned labor unions and politics. The traditional structures

of Kuna society delivered a level of labor discipline that the company was incapable of enforcing on its own. The head of UTRAKUNA monitored his members in order to make sure that they did not become alcoholics and that they fulfilled their obligations to their job, family, and community. In other words UTRAKUNA imposed stability and discipline on the Kuna labor force. The Kuna regard this model behavior to be part and parcel of their ethnic identity. As the UTRAKUNA president explained to me, "I make sure that they are responsible in their work and aren't absent too often. I don't want them to be like the Hispanics."

Perhaps even more important, however, UTRAKUNA (and the Kuna closed corporate ethnic identity in general) demobilized the Amerindian labor force politically. The institutionalization of an effective, parallel channel for management-labor negotiations exclusively reserved for the Kuna reduced the possibilities for interethnic class-based solidarity (see also Cabarrús 1979:81). UTRAKUNA and the other traditional institutions of Kuna society were responsive to most individual Kuna's concrete economic needs and interests, at least on a short-term basis. The Kuna, consequently, channeled their labor concerns through their traditional indigenous institutions and leadership structure rather than through the labor union, thus undermining the labor union's importance and relevance. Furthermore, with the revitalization of traditional Kuna culture on the plantation in the early 1970s, the Kuna have been pressured (as they had been when Cacique Olotebilibiquña was supervising them in the 1950s) to minimize their social ties with non-Amerindians. Given their formalized ethnic differentiation from the rest of the labor force, it was hard for the Kuna to identify with the interests of their non-Kuna co-workers. Active participation in a non-Kuna movement, such as a labor union, was generally viewed as a betrayal to one's race. Furthermore, most Kuna on the plantation did not consider themselves to be permanent banana workers. Their identity and long-term interests were rooted in the traditional communities on their natal islands hundreds of miles away. In short, the Kuna were "out of sync" with the rest of the labor force. Had the other plantation workers initiated a militant strike the movement would probably have bypassed the Kuna, since they were operating within a completely different set of social relations and obligations.

The special role the Kuna played in the transnational's ethnic divide-and-conquer strategy explains the attention and appreciation management accorded them. Even at the height of their incorporation into the labor force in the 1960s and early 1970s, the Kuna never represented more than 10 to 15 percent of the plantation workforce. In 1966 a Kuna

researcher estimated that approximately 800 Kuna worked in Bocas del Toro (compared to 1,400 in Panama City) (Holloman 1969: 127). The Kuna presence in Bocas, however, served as a model that management could hold up to the rest of the labor force for how workers should behave: disciplined, quiet, obedient, temperate, respectful, and (above all) apolitical. In fact, Guaymí labor leaders complained that the company purposefully hired Kuna at the expense of the Guaymí following the explosive 1960 strike in which the Guaymí played such a militant role. Guaymí workers registered a formal complaint with the Ministry of Labor in 1963, requesting that it "investigate the discrimination of the Chiriqui Land Company against the Guaymí in favor of the Cunas" (BDA: Oller de Sarasqueto to King, May 3, 1963).

The Kuna tendency toward separatism and political demobilization has been exacerbated by the company's ability to manipulate the leadership of UTRAKUNA. As in the case of the Guaymí, management realized early on that intermediaries were crucial for both the recruitment and the control of the Kuna labor force. Consequently, the company carefully cultivated the loyalty of the president of UTRAKUNA, guaranteeing him a comfortable position in the Labor Relations Office. The previous UTRAKUNA president, Tony Smith, had held the position for thirteen years. Under the company's tutelage he had grown virulently promanagement and anticommunist. By his own admission, he viewed preventing Kuna "troublemakers" and "communists" from infiltrating the labor force as his primary task. He maintained a political blacklist which he consulted regularly in order to ensure that only "very democratic" Kuna entered the labor force: "We Kuna come here to work and not to subvert the public order or to get involved in politics like the Hispanics. We can't let those who come to disturb the local peace give us all a bad name." Smith refused to meet with delegations from either the red- or the white-slate union movement, even when the fate of a Kuna worker was directly involved.

Smith's effectiveness in "successfully keeping communists out of the Kuna community" was confirmed by the head of the Labor Relations Department who told me that the UTRAKUNA leader had been "great for the company. He has provided us with seventeen years of fine service." When Smith lost the elections for the UTRAKUNA presidency in April 1983, the manager at first refused to replace him with the newly elected president. A *cacique* had to come up from San Blas and insist that the results of the UTRAKUNA election be respected, and that Smith be fired.

Although the company's strategy for delinking the Kuna from the labor movement had been successful up to the time of my fieldwork, it

was not invulnerable. There was nothing inherently anticommunist or even apolitical about the Kuna. In fact, the Communist party generally received a significant percentage of the Kuna vote during national elections in San Blas.¹⁷ Significantly, the Kuna rank and file in Bocas had grown so dissatisfied with Tony Smith's promanagement leadership that they changed UTRAKUNA's institutional process from consensus to election in order to oust him from his position as president, which he had monopolized for thirteen years.¹⁸ The newly elected UTRAKUNA president openly announced that his people could freely enter the union movement and that he would not stop them from "voting red." In the 1983 union elections, the Kuna voted for the first time almost unanimously in favor of the militant (red) slate. Overruling Tony Smith's opposition, they even selected two Kuna workers to run on the red-slate ticket whereas none was presented on the white slate. As additional evidence of the increasing involvement of the Kuna in the local labor movement, in the three other companies employing large numbers of Kuna (the purée plant, the cardboard boxing plant, and COBANA), Kuna were in leadership positions (albeit subordinate ones) within the union. An elderly Chiricano labor leader in the purée plant who was profoundly racist against Amerindians in general but had grudgingly come to revise his assessment of the Kuna because of their recent cooperation with the independent union movement explained to me:

Before, the Kuna were the biggest enemy of the union. It was as if they confused their regime—you know, their Indian system—with the union. The union wasn't working; the Kuna would only follow one of their own people. Proof was that three years ago we had a strike and the Kuna wouldn't stop working. Then they got rid of their representative and we started giving them explanations. It seems that they have been analyzing the situation and have realized their past errors and have changed their ideology. It's gotten so civilized now that we even call one another *compañero* [comrade/companion].

There have even been cases, furthermore, of groups of Kuna participating in the union movement through their traditional institutions. For example, during the Sixaola strike on the Costa Rican side of the plantation in January 1982 the Kuna workers joined the strikers en masse in accordance with the directive of their formal local-level leader.¹⁹ As the unity of action of the Kuna workers during the Sixaola strike illustrates, the Kuna workforce can be a double-edged weapon from management's perspective. Merely the existence of an organization as unified as UTRAKUNA is, in and of itself, a threat to management since it provides workers with an example of the potential power of their unity. Traditional closed corporate community modes of action such as co-

hesiveness and obedience to primary group norms have served to marginalize the Kuna from the union movement, but they could accomplish the reverse. Should the preferential treatment that the Kuna receive from the transnational be discontinued, or should it be overshadowed by a general deterioration in wages (as happened in Sixaola before the 1982 strike), these same traditional characteristics could become the basis for the formation of a highly disciplined, politicized cadre.

TWELVE / Hispanics in the Labor Force

The Nicas brought over by the [United Fruit] Company, arrived with no law or God. . . . They infused the plantations with unparalleled savageness, filling them with vendettas and blood. They would kill on a whim. . . . The bananas arrived at the North American ports, stained in blood.

—Joaquín Belcño, *Flor de Banano*, 1970

The final ethnic group to be discussed is, in fact, composed of several different ethnic groups, which I have somewhat arbitrarily grouped under the term *Hispanics*. Anthropological literature that analyzes Hispanic (Mestizo/Latín/Ladino) ethnicity in Latin America is sparse. There are no objective criteria for deciding when to consider a regional or a national identity an ethnic one. At times it is merely a case of semantics, complicated by the subjectivity and fluidity of any given ethnicity. One's ethnicity depends upon one's larger social framework. I have chosen to treat Nicaraguans, Hondurans, Guanacastecans, and Chiricanos as distinct ethnic groups, and I have arbitrarily lumped all non-Guanacastecan Costa Ricans and all non-Chiricano Panamanians into two separate ethnic groups. The specifics of these ethnic subdivisions are not especially significant; what is important is the central role that ethnicity plays in structuring the historical experience of the different groups of Hispanics in the Bocas Division's labor force.

THE FIRST HISPANICS TO ENTER THE LABOR FORCE

When the companies that preceded the United Fruit Company initiated operations in Bocas del Toro and Limón provinces the resident His-

panic population was negligible. In 1880 only 600 non-Amerindians resided in all of Limón Province (DGE 1885, cited in Hall 1978: 68) and in the mid-1880s there were only 200 inhabitants in the Sixaola Valley (Gabb 1981: 102). As was noted in chapter 5, the transnational was unable to attract Costa Rican and Panamanian Hispanics to work in the inhospitable banana zones. The working conditions were below the customary standards of the Hispanic population. In 1872 the construction manager of the Costa Rican interoceanic railroad evacuated "all Costa Rican laborers for health reasons" from Limón Province (*Gaceta Oficial*, Dec. 11, 1872: 1, cited in Duncan and Meléndez 1981: 69). Hispanics had no incentive to migrate in large numbers to the Atlantic lowlands, especially since they had access to land for subsistence crops, and could satisfy their cash needs (in the case of Costa Ricans) through occasional wage labor during the coffee harvest. Before the turn of the century, wages in the Central Highlands of Costa Rica were superior to those on the banana plantations (Church 1895: 5, cited in Koch 1975: 65). Although the largest landlords in the Bocas/Limón region were Costa Rican and Panamanian Hispanics they did not actually live on their holdings, and, except as serving as intermediaries for land acquisition by the transnational, very few were involved in the banana industry (Quesada 1977: 77; see chapter 2). In 1908, of 203 small farmers who sold bananas without contract to the company in Limón, only 13 had Spanish surnames (Koch 1975: 275).

The first Hispanics to enter the banana industry's labor force in large numbers were strikebreakers in the 1910s. Two hundred "white laborers . . . mostly Nicaraguans" were brought to the Bocas Division to break a strike in 1913 (*La Información*, March 29, 1913: 2). According to elderly blacks these Hispanic strikebreakers did not remain on the plantation for long periods because of the poor working conditions and the low wages. They lacked proletarian discipline and the skills necessary for permanent employment on a plantation, and were such inefficient workers that they did not even seriously undermine the strike movements: "The Spaniards them when them come, they work but they don't know the work. They can't dig drain, they don't know how to grade a banana. They don't know the work. When you bring in raw men, they can't do the work. No need to shoot the Spaniards 'cause you know the work can't go on. You shoot who can do the work—the black men them." On several different occasions, elderly black workers reminisced with humor how the "Spanish" strikebreakers were physically incapable of carrying the heavy stems of bananas on their shoulders and, complaining to the foremen that they were too heavy, cut them in half.¹

After 1900, the situation changed as wages in Limón rose relative to those paid in the Highlands of Costa Rica. According to elderly informants, by 1915 banana workers in Limón were receiving twice as much as agricultural laborers in the Central Highlands. Furthermore, the West Indian labor force was becoming increasingly militant in its demands for higher wages and better working conditions (see chapter 5). More Hispanics, consequently, were imported to replace blacks in order to perform the less desirable tasks on the plantation (cf. *Times*, May 17, 1919: 1; BDA: Kyes to Cutter, April 8, 1916; Kyes to Cutter, April 19, 1916).

Opening up new districts to banana cultivation was the "worst category of work" on the plantation. As noted, clearing virgin jungle was (and still is) the hardest, most dangerous task in the banana industry. By the late 1910s blacks refused to work in clearing underbrush from new territories. According to the elderly West Indians I interviewed, the construction of the last portion of the Sixaola-Talamanca railroad in the late 1910s and the clearing of the new farms in the Talamanca Valley District in 1916 was performed exclusively by "high-colored white people from Nicaragua." As noted in chapter 6, by the 1920s a definite labor hierarchy had emerged:

[The] company contracted men [in] 1916 from Nicaragua and they was Spaniards. Underbrushing and lining, and planting and falling, it always be Spaniards—always. Making of new farms, always be Spaniards do that work. Because it is more faster work when they take it that way. Because the Spaniard them they love that work. But after they fall the farm they don't business with nothing again; black man go in now and make *cañon* [drains?]. Bare black people cut [harvest] the bananas. The Spaniard them they more like the woodland work, moorish work with contractors. They go from farm to farm, farm to farm. Most of them is all Nicaraguans. You have some Hondurians, some Guatemaltecos, very few. The most Nicas [Nicaraguans]. Guanacastecos too. They live in the woodland in ranches.

Accounts from this period agree that Nicaraguans performed the most strenuous "woodland" work. According to 114-year-old Mr. Bettel, the very first Hispanics to be brought to the Bocas Division were a crew of Nicaraguans contracted in 1905. Subsequently, the company made it a practice to delegate the task of clearing new territory to Nicaraguan contractors who would bring their laborers with them from their homeland. The original Hispanic workers, therefore, were not employed directly by the company. They arrived only on temporary contracts for the specific task of clearing jungle and then they left.

Although most elderly blacks refer to these early Hispanic workers by the term *Spaniards*, when questioned for details, they single out the

Nicaraguans [*Nicas*] as distinct from the rest. Nicaraguans were famous for their skill as ax men: "Those people from Rivas [Nicaragua] were the best we ever had for ax work, real fast. Later they learned ditch work as well. The ax work was the hardest. The blacks were mostly banana cutters and carriers." The heavy job of chopping virgin jungle became so strongly associated with Nicaraguans that Kepner in his introductory description of a typical banana division in Latin America refers in generic terms to the "strong-armed Nicaraguan axemen who fell the great trees, so that the area appears as 'a heavy forest shorn off'" (1936: 16).

Most Nicaraguan ax men were probably from the Pacific Coast Province of Rivas where, at the turn of the century, large landlords were consolidating their immense cattle haciendas. According to anthropologist Marc Edelman (1985: chap. 3), the boom in the Rivas cattle industry that began in the late 1800s resulted in the expulsion of thousands of desperately poor, landless laborers. Many crossed illegally into Guanacaste Province in Costa Rica and eventually found their way to the banana plantations on the Atlantic Coast (see map 1). At this time no comparable process of land expropriation was occurring in Costa Rica and Panama. Nicaraguans, consequently, were the first Hispanics to become full-time banana workers in large numbers. Another factor spurring Nicaraguans to migrate in search of wage work even under the most unfavorable conditions were the repeated violent revolutions wracking their homeland. In fact, some of the "strong-armed Nicaraguan axemen" were probably political refugees.

Both local blacks and Amerindians described these immigrant Hispanics with disdain, claiming they were violent, murderous, alcoholic savages. When pressed for details, informants invariably singled out Nicaraguans as "the most barbarous people. The colored man don't like to be in one room with them. No no no. They can live in one building but not in one room." I was told horror stories of wanton violence: "The Nicas there are a barbarous people, you understand. They chop up one another for joke, man. Right beside me in Talamanca [in 1921] over a gambling table a Nicaraguan man get his machete and him go wham whaps, and you see the man's body just do that way and drop. Him dead. He cross over the river and go to Panama side. Those days after they cross over the river, over Sixaola boundary, Costa Rica don't business with them." Even the Bribri who were working in Talamanca in the 1920s when Nicaraguans began arriving in large numbers referred to them with depreciation: "We didn't go near those people. At that time the *Castellanos* [Hispanics] were bad and on paydays they would kill. We would always hurry back from the pay car. They would

kill among themselves. The blacks didn't kill very much. All the dead were at the hands of the *Castellanos*, mostly Nicaraguans."

The second most numerous group of Hispanics to enter the plantation labor force in the mid-1920s were Guanacastecans. Guanacaste is one of the poorest provinces of Costa Rica and borders on Nicaragua on the Pacific Coast (see map 1). In addition to suffering from a harsh dry season, historically it has been dominated by extensive cattle haciendas. Indeed, during the 1920s and 1930s Guanacaste was subject to a structural transformation similar to the one the neighboring province of Rivas across the border in Nicaragua had gone through at the turn of the century.⁷ A boost in the value of cattle resulted in the consolidation of extensive cattle ranches, which had only minimal labor requirements. The consolidation of these haciendas occurred at the expense of the local subsistence farming population (Edelman 1985). The expulsion of small farmers from their subsistence plots was exacerbated by the passage in 1932 of protectionist legislation that restricted the importation of Nicaraguan beef. This legislation spurred on an enclosure movement and created a reserve of landless laborers. Not surprisingly, the transnational began recruiting "for woodland work" from this pool of displaced peasants: "I know from several very good sources that there are hundreds of laborers in Guanacaste and other parts of the Pacific slope in Costa Rica who are only looking for an opportunity to come here and take up work with us" (BDA: Pollan to Blair, Sept. 28, 1933; see also BDA: Limón manager to Adams, March 26, 1926).

By the 1930s, another Hispanic cohort, Costa Ricans from the Central Highlands, began migrating to the banana zones in large numbers. From 1916 to 1936 the Limón population increased by 49.3 percent whereas that of the Central Highlands augmented by only 27.7 percent (Taylor 1980: 82). The proportion of Hispanics in the Limón population rose from 31 percent in 1927 to 73 percent in 1950 (Casey 1979: 245). The bulk of the new Hispanic immigrants, especially those who worked on the banana plantations, were desperately poor, young, unmarried men. In fact, a not insignificant number were either fleeing the law or had been confined to Limón Province by the Costa Rican judicial system as punishment of criminal offenses. The Sixaola and Talamanca districts of the Bocas Division attracted many of the outlaws and exiles since they were (and still are) the most isolated and inaccessible banana plantations in the country.⁸

The best description of Hispanic participation in the labor force during this early period was provided by Fallas, a native of the Central Highlands of Costa Rica, who was exiled to Limón for his role in the union movement. In the mid-1920s, he was employed on the labor gang

of a Nicaraguan contractor. They were assigned to clear a path through virgin jungle for the railroad in the Estrella Valley District, just north of the Talamanca District (see map 1). Most of his fellow workers, according to his account, were Nicaraguans or Guanacastecans. He made reference, however, to Costa Rican Highlanders and outlaws as well working under exceptionally strenuous conditions:

And we'd trudge higher up hunched over at the waist from the pain. Soon we'd all be naked to the waist with the sweat flowing in streams stinging our eyes, wetting our pants, dripping off of our arms. And so we continued for hours and hours to the point of nausea, with spasms in our legs and horrible splitting aches in our heads. . . .

Hundreds of times we would slip over tree trunks falling through into the swamp, petrified that we might land on some horrible serpent. Then all of a sudden, thousands of wasps would swarm out at us; or sometimes it was the hornets, huge, black, and ferocious; they were especially aggressive, beelining directly for our faces, converting us into deformed-looking, swollen monsters. . . .

Dragging ourselves through the mud up to our thighs we would finally arrive from work aching all over, the skin on our hands blistered white. We would return like beaten dogs walking without will in silence. (Fallas 1978a: 119-20, 140, 174)

Typically, Fallas and two other Hispanic companions were assigned the most dangerous tasks of dynamiting boulders out of the railroad's path. According to his descriptions, most blacks in the region had already established themselves by this time as independent farmers (*ibid.*: 147-52). They were no longer so desperate as to have to submit themselves to the rigors of company work, and certainly not to the dangerous task of dynamiting boulders. Although blacks still constituted a majority of the workers in the Bocas Division during World War II it was Hispanics, especially Guanacastecans, who performed the most undesirable tasks. As late as the mid-1950s, when the Guaymí had entered the labor force en masse to "chop bush," large groups of Guanacastecans (up to 150 at a time) were still imported specifically to clear the overgrown cacao orchards of the Sixaola District (BDA: Munch to Moore, March 11, 1954). Guanacastecans were the only workers willing to compete with the Guaymí for the most unpleasant, poorly remunerated task of clearing bush.⁴

On the plantation's periphery the same occupational hierarchy held firm. For example, according to a Ministry of Labor inspector, all the woodcutters on a privately owned sawmill just outside the Sixaola District in the 1950s were Nicaraguans and Guanacastecans, whereas all the workers running machinery inside the mill were Costa Rican His-

panics from the Highlands. Blacks did not even accept employment at the sawmill since they could earn a better livelihood from their cacao farms.

This occupational/ethnic hierarchy persists. During my fieldwork on the Costa Rican side of the Bocas Division in the Sixaola District, Guanacastecans represented 40 percent of the labor force, followed by workers from Limón who accounted for only 14 percent (see figure 5). Random interviews with workers from Limón revealed that the majority were, in fact, second-generation Guanacastecans, that is, the offspring of Guanacastecan parents who had migrated to Limón in the 1950s and 1960s in search of agricultural wage work. Indeed, tens of thousands of Guanacastecans came to the Limón region in the 1960s and 1970s when the banana industry was rehabilitated by the introduction of disease-resistant varieties (Valerie and Gran Nain). From 1963 to 1973, 41.4 percent of the population growth in Limón was due to immigration by Guanacastecans (Fernandez, Schmidt, and Basauri 1977:316).

Fleeing landlessness, low wages, and a harsh dry season Guanacastecans have become the backbone of the Costa Rican banana industry in Limón as well as the agricultural day labor reserve throughout the rest of the country.⁵ They emigrate in the peak of their youth to work as day laborers in either the cattle, cacao, or banana industries. Many subsequently adopt a semimigratory life style, alternating between residence in Guanacaste and six-month stints in the banana regions. The banana companies encourage short cycles of employment; they fire newly arrived laborers before they pass the three-month probation period so that they can not qualify for the job tenure benefits accorded to permanent workers and stipulated by Costa Rican labor law.⁶ Many Guanacastecans migrate to the banana plantations solely for the duration of the dry season (roughly January through April), when nothing can be grown locally. Most of these migrants have access to small, family-owned plots of land in Guanacaste, which carry them through half the year. Once again, the subsistence economy of a struggling peasantry has subsidized the transnational's labor costs.

A racist ideology has emerged legitimizing the exploitation of Guanacastecans as agricultural day laborers. Costa Ricans referred to them as surplus Nicaraguans (*Nicas regalados*).⁷ Guanacastecans are distinguished from other Costa Rican Hispanics by a set of cultural and physical characteristics, including a dark complexion," colloquial expressions, a regional accent, and mannerisms (i.e., drunken howls). The parents of some Guanacastecans were Nicaraguan emigrants, and probably some Guanacastecans on the plantation were really Nicara-

guans passing as Costa Rican nationals. Despite their strong regionalist ethnic identity, however, Guanacastecans were patriotically Costa Rican. Frequently I heard them express homesick feelings and dream aloud of a good *atol* (a roasted corn drink).

In the Bocas Division, most of the Guanacastecan migrant workers were young and viewed plantation wage work as a temporary adventure. This orientation reduced their interest in union organizing and in other struggles for the long-term improvement of working and living conditions on the plantation. They returned regularly to their home communities for holidays (especially Easter and Christmas), and many spent hard-earned banana wage savings in week-long binges.⁹ When I asked them why they had chosen to work on the plantation, some cited the dramatic wage difference between their home communities and the banana zone. The most common answer, however, was that the "heat problem" had driven them away from Guanacaste: "It's just too hot over there right now. No way! You just can't live in Guanacaste. [*Hay que va! Está muy caliente ayá ahora que va! No se puede vivir en Guanacaste.*]"

Another major cohort of Guanacastecans (generally older men and some women as well) left the banana industry and established themselves as independent farmers on the periphery of the plantation just as West Indian immigrants had done a half century earlier. Once again, this pattern is a result of common sense and the logic of the life cycle: older workers prefer the security of owning a private plot of land to the uncertainty of wage labor (see the preface and chapter 7). Murillo and Hernández report that 50 percent of the small, Hispanic cacao farmers they interviewed in Limón were of Guanacastecan origin and that most had formerly worked on banana plantations. Significantly, the second largest group (37.5 percent) were Nicaraguans (1981:115).

I witnessed the process of the "peasantization" of Hispanic laborers during my fieldwork. The entire upper portion of the Sixaola Valley (several thousand acres), which had formerly belonged to the transnational, was invaded by some 600 to 800 families of Hispanics, 20 percent of whom were Guanacastecan, former banana workers (IDALF: Assorted papers). They were in the process of repeating the same pattern initiated by the West Indian labor force in the 1910s and 1920s. The number of squatters increased virtually daily during my fieldwork; several new huts were constructed each week. At least a dozen of the banana workers whom I had befriended during the initial phase of my fieldwork had become squatters on the plantation periphery before I left. As the superintendent of the Sixaola District noted, "This is the hardest zone to keep laborers. You spend all that money to bus them

down here and then they just up and leave you to become squatters instead."

Typical of the ambiguous peasant/proletarian status of small farmers on plantation peripheries, many Hispanic squatters eventually became a valuable source of irregular labor for the company during periods of economic crisis. For example, a Nicaraguan squatter whom I had befriended during my first months of fieldwork and who had always expressed great pride in his independence from the transnational wrote me a letter in 1985, a year after my departure, explaining that he had been forced against his will to seek employment on the plantation in order to repay a delinquent loan. The Costa Rican Ministry of Agriculture had extended him credit to plant corn but the market price for corn that year dropped and he was not able to cover his expenses. He was forced, consequently, to sell a portion of his land and take up temporary employment with the transnational in order to pay back his debt to the Ministry. Four months later I received another letter in which he proudly stated that he had saved enough cash to cancel his debts and reestablish himself as a full-time peasant. Six months later he had been forced once again into plantation wage work, this time in order to repay medical bills incurred when his wife was operated on for a bleeding ulcer.

WORLD WAR II AND INTENSIFIED LABOR RECRUITMENT

As noted in chapter 6, during World War II, the Bocas Division lost the most dynamic sector of its labor force to the Panama Canal where wages were considerably higher. Internal company reports abound with complaints about the superannuated and shrinking labor pool: "The farms are beginning to suffer as the labor we have are mostly old and feeble. The situation is not going to improve, due to the demand and salaries of the Canal Zone" (BDA: Kelley to Munch, June 17, 1941). At the same time, the company's demand for heavy labor was rising dramatically because of its 1942 U.S. Army contract to grow abacá. "If we should go into abacá production by the end of the year, it will be almost impossible to find good harvesting men as well as two shifts of Plant men assuming a 20 to 24 hour day" (BDA: Kelley to Munch, June 17, 1941). During this period, Amerindians were not yet an important component of the Bocas labor force, and the company was unwilling to raise wages sufficiently to attract Hispanic workers locally. "I suggest that an effort be made to import from two to three hundred men. . . . The [Panamanian] Government may stress the point that the Company should increase its wage scale and thus attract labor, but our total operating cost

as of May 31st was \$0.073 per pound [cacao] with market prices only slightly higher. Any wage increase, therefore, will not allow us to even break even" (ibid.).

Finally on March 31, 1942, the Panamanian government granted the company permission to import "500 Central Americans" (BDA: Executive resolution #196, March 31, 1942, Ministry of Foreign Relations, Department of Migration). A massive influx of Hispanic Central Americans (primarily Hondurans and Nicaraguans) into the Bocas Division then began and lasted through the early 1950s.¹⁰ It was not until the late 1950s and 1960s that Amerindians began to enter the local labor force in large enough numbers to replace Central American immigrants as the cheapest source of labor (see chapter 8).¹¹

Although Nicaraguans constituted the largest single national ethnic group to immigrate to the plantation during this period, it was in Honduras that the company initiated the most systematic and expensive labor recruitment program via a local subsidiary, the Tela Railroad Company. The Honduran plantations had a surplus of experienced laborers in World War II as they had drastically curtailed operations because of the spread of Panama disease and the wartime shipping crisis (LaBarge 1959: 29). The company, therefore, selected its best Honduran workers and sent them to Bocas. The Honduran government cooperated in exporting its nation's surplus labor to alleviate the economic crisis: "All areas . . . visited were certainly most desolate, and everyone [was] eager for a chance to go to work again. These people are subsisting on a few little milpas and are very much alarmed because their plantings of both chato bananas and plantains are beginning to be affected by Panama Disease and they fear that this will bring utter ruin to their region. . . . Offering these people employment would be a blessing for them and to the country" (BDA: Turnbull to Scott, April 21, 1951).

One of the Hondurans (now an independent cacao farmer on abandoned land he seized from the company in the early 1960s) who was recruited during this period described to me how he was loaded on a ship in La Ceiba along with 800 other workers and transported to the port of Almirante in Bocas del Toro. These Hondurans were specifically contracted to work in the abacá fields and were promised a wage three times higher than the one prevailing in La Ceiba.¹² Through the 1940s, Hondurans (and later Nicaraguans) dominated abacá fieldwork; most blacks were concentrated in the less strenuous jobs inside the abacá processing plant. Without the Hondurans (and other foreigners) the company would not have been able to find sufficient laborers willing to work for the wages it was offering for the taxing task of abacá harvesting and planting. This policy provoked periodic denunciations in the Panama-

nian press. In 1949, for example, a reporter stated that only 1,174 out of 3,427 of the employees in the Bocas Division were Panamanian citizens (*La Nación*, Jan. 28, 1949). Nevertheless, foreign laborers continued to enter the Bocas labor force in large numbers through the early 1950s. In 1951 alone "439 laborers, women and children were imported from Honduras" (BDA: Moore to Diebold, Feb. 6, 1952).

Nicaraguan Hispanics immigrated to the Bocas Division in even larger numbers than Hondurans during this period. In fact, Nicaraguans were so desperate for jobs that, according to one official, "with the Nicaraguans, you hardly even had to recruit them; they came on their own by foot." They illegally entered the country on foot by the thousands through Guanacaste. Many subsequently reached the Costa Rican side of the Bocas Division at their own expense. As there was no road, they had to walk south from Limón through the Talamanca Mountains.¹ In 1951, for example, according to a company report, "291 laborers arrived at Sixaola at their own expense and were permitted to enter Panama to work for the Company being given *Permisos Especiales* [Special Permits]" (BDA: Myrick to Redmond, Jan. 15, 1952). The total labor force in the Bocas Division during the late 1940s and early 1950s fluctuated between 2,500 and 3,500; the steady influx of foreign Hispanic laborers, therefore, was crucial to the operation of the division, especially since the immigrants were willing to perform the most strenuous tasks rejected by the black population: harvesting abacá, cutting underbrush in cacao orchards, and rehabilitating bananas.

Although most Nicaraguans arrived on their own, the company also recruited a substantial number directly from Nicaragua and Guanacaste. In the late 1940s an agent was paid \$1,000 per month to send Nicaraguan laborers to the Bocas and Armuelles plantations in Panama (BDA: Assorted payment vouchers 1947, 1948). The company even arranged for General Somoza (who was in power in Nicaragua) to pressure Panamanian officials to be more lenient in allowing Nicaraguans to enter Panama in order to work on the United Fruit Company's farms: "Both the General [Somoza] and the Coronel [Colonel] were so interested [in labor recruitment] that they told Chava that Coronel Remon [president of Panama] and some Panamanian Ministers were due to visit them the following day and that they were going to approach the Panamanian Officials on the matter of allowing Nicaraguans to enter Panama to work for the Company exempt from deposit" (BDA: Heck to Diebold, May 30, 1949). The final agreement for allowing Nicaraguans to enter Bocas del Toro was signed in 1947 by the three governments involved: Panama, Costa Rica, and Nicaragua. It specified that only those Nicaraguans who were already illegally inside Costa Rica (mostly in the border

province of Guanacaste) could be transported to the Panamanian side of the Bocas Division (BDA: Granados to Sanderson, Dec. 13, 1946; Hamer to Myrick, Jan. 10, 1947). The economic crisis in Nicaragua was so extreme that in 1946 "in the province of Guanacaste alone there [were] 40,000" Nicaraguans desperately looking for employment as agricultural laborers (BDA: Memorandum for Obtaining Workers for the UFCO, Narváez, Dec. 10, 1946). Nicaraguans recruited in this fashion in the late 1940s and early 1950s told me that company agents artificially swelled the ranks of the undocumented Nicaraguan laborers in Costa Rica by arranging for Nicaraguans living in the neighboring province of Rivas to cross the border into Costa Rica at night. These desperately poor agricultural workers were then flown down to Sixaola from the airports that the company operated along the Costa Rica–Nicaragua border.

In this manner, from January 1947 through the early 1950s, a constant stream of Nicaraguans entered Bocas via the land border at the Sixaola Bridge (see map 2). In the month of January 1947 alone (when the first agreement with the three governments was signed) 130 Nicaraguan workers were flown from Guanacaste to the Bocas Division, and 187 to the Armuelles Division (BDA: Zuñiga, "For Almirante, for Puerto Armuelles," March 27, 1947). By June 1949 the company had already built special "camps to take care of 180 Nicaraguan laborers with families and . . . 120 more on a single basis making a total of 300 laborers" (BDA: Diebold to Myrick, June 27, 1949).¹⁴

Nicaraguan laborers represented an even more crucial component of the labor force in the company's Pacific Coast divisions in Costa Rica (Golfito and Quepos) and Panama (Armuelles) (see map 1). I interviewed elderly Nicaraguans in remote rural communities in Rivas Province who claimed that company recruiters used to run radio advertisements on local stations calling for laborers. The next day they would park cattle trucks in the central plaza honking their horns and announcing their imminent departure for the Pacific Coast banana plantations in Panama and Costa Rica. Migration to the Costa Rican and Panamanian banana plantations became such an "institution" among young Nicaraguan men in the 1950s that it has been rendered into literature by a Nicaraguan author who participated in the labor flow (cf. Quintana 1962). So many Nicaraguans worked on the Costa Rican banana plantations in the late 1950s and 1960s that the Sandinistas sent cadre to the region to organize their fellow countrymen, since repression at home prohibited open political discussion (Borge 1980).¹⁵

By the mid-1950s, the Panamanian government refused to grant the United Fruit Company permission to import additional foreign la-

borers. Significant numbers of Panamanian laborers from the Province of Chiriquí (as well as Kuna and Guaymí Amerindians) had begun entering the labor force. Chiricanos were the only group of Panamanian Hispanics willing to work for the company as day laborers. In the 1930s there was no reason for them to migrate all the way to Bocas del Toro to find wage labor employment as they could work on the company's newly opened Pacific Coast subsidiary (the Armuelles Division) located in their home province (see map 1). At that time only a minority was willing to work permanently for wages in the Armuelles Division since they had access to land locally. They would work for the transnational only between harvests during the dry season in an arrangement comparable to that of young Guanacastecan migrants today. Company files abound with references to the instability of the Chiricano laborers. This instability became the company's justification to the government for not complying with Panama's legal requirement that 75 percent of its labor force be composed of Panamanian nationals: "It is well known that the West Indians, the Costa Ricans and the Nicaraguans are permanent and stable year round workers. The nationals, however, have always only worked for short periods. The nature of our operations here render it imperative that we be able to count on full-time laborers" (BDA: Memorandum, Blair, April 26, 1932). By the late 1940s, however, the labor market in Chiriquí Province was beginning to change dramatically. Chiricanos were entering the Armuelles Division in such large numbers that company officials began channeling them to Bocas del Toro where the shortage of Panamanian nationals had become an acute political problem.

Elderly Bocatoreños referred to these early Chiricano migrants to Bocas in much the same way as they did to the Nicaraguan and Guanacastecan immigrants: rough, violent drunkards—the classic characteristics associated with desperately poor landless migrant laborers. An elderly Chiricano complained to me that during his first years in Bocas, "No one liked us Chiricanos. They wouldn't even sell us coffee." He had a difficult time finding someone willing to provide him with food on credit until he received his first paycheck. When pressed on the subject, he admitted that distrust was warranted, since most of the Chiricanos entering Bocas at the time were "adventurers." In fact the two companions with whom he had crossed the mountains from Chiriquí ran off after their first payday without honoring their debt at the canteen where they had received food on credit.

At the time of my fieldwork, Chiricanos represented 14 percent of the day labor force in the Bocas Division (see figure 2), by far the largest cohort of Panamanian Hispanics coming from a single region. Further-

more, a large proportion of the Hispanic workers born in Bocas were the descendants of Chiricano immigrants (just as many of the Limón-born workers in the Sixaola District were second-generation Guanacastecans). Chiricanos and their descendants, therefore, comprised the bulk of the Hispanic day laborers on the plantation. Significantly, Hispanics from Panama City represented less than one percent of the day labor force, and Hispanics from all of Panama combined (excluding Chiriquí and Bocas) added up to only 4 percent (see figure 2).

Chiricanos have been even more upwardly mobile in the company's occupational hierarchy than blacks. They predominated in both low-level and high-level supervisory tasks. As figure 3 illustrates, a disproportionate number of Chiricanos were monthly employees (25 percent) in comparison to day laborers (14 percent), and an even greater disproportion (31 percent) earned over \$500 per month. At the same time they constituted the regional ethnic group that contributed the highest number of foremen and assistant foremen, followed by Bocas (which, as noted above, included many second-generation Chiricano descendants). Sixteen out of twenty-two of the packing plant administrators, six out of ten assistant superintendents; five out of seven superintendents, forty-six of the seventy-five tractor drivers; and the second highest official (after the North American manager) were Chiricanos. On the state-owned farms this pattern was even more dramatic. At COBANA, all employees earning over \$500 per month were Chiricanos, as was the head manager, his two assistants, the three assistant administrators, and six out of eight foremen.

Nationalism has been crucial to Chiricano upward mobility. What the black population referred to deprecatingly as the "Latinization" of the Bocas Division has indeed been a conscious United Fruit Company policy. In response to nationalist pressures from the Panamanian government, Hispanics have been systematically promoted into middle-level management positions. The Ministry of Labor has consistently registered complaints against the company for "discriminating against natives" in promotions to the "better class positions" (BDA: Stone to Myrick, Nov. 8, 1940). In 1940, for example, the secretary of agriculture and commerce sent the company a detailed list showing cases of North American employees receiving higher pay than Panamanians for comparable work at the managerial level (*ibid.*, Dec. 11, 1940). The Panamanian press began to publicize this issue; the company's agent reported "there should not be any doubt in the mind of anyone that there is a formidable move afoot to obtain equality in salaries, living conditions etc., between *Panameños* and Americans" (*ibid.*).

Panamanian nationalism specifically excluded blacks who, as was

documented in chapter 7, were explicitly designated as unwanted foreigners in the racist upheavals accompanying the economic dislocation of World War II. Ironically, the descendants of Nicaraguan and Honduran immigrants, on the other hand, have benefited from Panamanian nationalism since there has been no phenotypical means for preventing them from becoming fully assimilated into local Hispanic society. This nationalism and political pressure obliged the company to override objective differences in "labor quality" in determining the promotion of Hispanic Panamanians to higher positions within the local labor hierarchy. Although management considered Chiricanos to be political troublemakers of a "lower labor quality" the company was pressured to employ large numbers by the Panamanian state.

THIRTEEN / Hispanic Political Mobilization and Labor Control

As very few Panamanians have ever been raised to work . . . I will probably call on you for a good many Costa Ricans in the near future. As there are only a few natives [Hispanics] in this district that we can use. [sic] As a matter of fact, the few Costa Ricans that we have here are excellent men, and on the whole I think are much better than the Panamanians.

—Letter from the manager of the Bocas Division to the manager of the Limón Division, July 23, 1918

Nicaraguans and Guanacastecans are a wild people of caste with thick skin who like to work hard; they're not afraid of sweating. Costa Ricans are whimps when it comes to working. [*Los Nicas y Guanacastecos son gente brava de casta más cuerón; les gustan trabajar y no tienen miedo de sudar. Los Ticos son pendejos en el trabajo.*]

—Bocas Division foreman, 1983

More Hispanics than Guaymí are communist because they are smarter.

—Bocas Division foreman, 1983

"Labor quality" and politicization are treated by both workers and management on the plantation as abstract ethnic character traits, inherent "in the blood" of each "race." The well-defined and in many cases intricate differences in political orientation and capacity for work of the various groups and subgroups of Hispanics provide privileged insight into elucidating the structural roots of this perception.

LABOR QUALITY

As noted in the previous chapter and in chapters 5 and 6, by the 1920s and 1930s, Hispanics—primarily Nicaraguans and Guanacastecans—began replacing West Indians in the most strenuous, dangerous tasks on the plantation. Nicaragua and the Province of Guanacaste took the place of the West Indies as the banana industry's "reservoir" for inexpensive labor. Since the 1920s, Nicaraguans have been considered the best workers on the plantation.¹ As in the case of Guanacastecans, the appreciation for Nicaraguan labor discipline extended beyond the plan-

tation context; throughout Costa Rica, Nicaraguans have developed a "longstanding reputation as exemplary workers" (Edelman 1984: 389). Wherever wages were lowest and working conditions most unpleasant, Nicaraguans and Guanacastecans predominated. As noted in the discussion of the Bribri in the cash economy, it was not uncommon for Amerindian small farmers to hire Nicaraguans, and to a lesser extent Guanacastecans, to perform the most undesirable tasks on their farms (see chapter 4).²

Nicaraguans and Guanacastecans were willing to work harder than other ethnic groups because of poverty, unsatisfactory employment alternatives, and the correlation of forces between landlord and small farmer in their region of origin. The role of this last factor—class struggle—is the most interesting as it introduces a dynamic dimension into the analysis of labor quality; an economic explanation is not sufficient. In his historical analysis of labor quality on *latifundios* in Guanacaste, Edelman provides this kind of "class struggle analysis" (1985: 117 ff.). He notes that Costa Rican landlords consider Nicaraguans to be far superior workers than Costa Ricans:³ "[Nicaraguans] had historically been submitted to more rigorous systems of labor control and were consequently more pliable than native Guanacastecans. . . . Descriptions of conditions in Nicaragua in the late nineteenth century leave little doubt that the average hacienda laborer there endured a more severe work regime and that a well-socialized Nicaraguan worker was less likely than the average Guanacastecan to be presumptuous about his traditional rights" (ibid.: 120–21). The superintendent of agriculture in the Bocas Division provided me with virtually the same explanation (if not in scholarly language) for why Nicaraguans were excellent workers: "Much of the problem with Ticos is their government. Their labor code promotes degeneracy [*libertinaje*]. Those governments in Nicaragua [Somoza's dictatorship] just don't tolerate the degeneracy we have here."

Of course, the factors affecting the relations of various classes and class fractions in any given area are complicated and require careful examination. For example, according to Edelman (ibid.: 128), following a series of protective laws for the Costa Rican cattle industry in 1932, landlords introduced wire fencing into Guanacaste and initiated an enclosure movement; furthermore, "a new level of labor discipline" emerged on Guanacastecan cattle haciendas. Nevertheless, the strength of the local landlords and of state repression in Costa Rica was never equal to that in Nicaragua. Historically Guanacastecan peasants have successfully annexed land from landlords. They have sometimes even

won their legal battles in court (*ibid.*:258 ff., 204 ff.). Guanacaste, nevertheless, has remained one of the poorest regions of Costa Rica with significantly lower wages than the rest of the country.

This wage differential is crucial today. Newly arrived Guanacastecan immigrants on the plantation were elated by the salaries they were receiving on the plantation. An incredulous Guanacastecan who was receiving an eight-hour minimum wage of 188 colones (U.S. \$3.76) on the plantation told me that a week earlier he had been receiving only 75 colones (U.S. \$1.67) for harder work chopping cattle pastures in his home community. Guanacastecans explained that they "know how to work well" because their homeland is hot and dry. The working conditions in their natal communities—chopping cattle pastures under the hot sun with no shade for miles around, or cutting sorghum and sugar cane—compared unfavorably with the hardest tasks on the banana plantation. Non-Guanacastecan banana workers complained that these enthusiastic Guanacastecan immigrants depressed the local wage scale: "He thinks he's so rich because he's used to 25 colones a day and here he makes 150, 200, and he's all excited. But with time he too feels the pinch when he sees it's not the same cost of living as Guanacaste."⁴

As was demonstrated in detail in the case of the Guaymí, laborers from regions of extreme poverty and deprivation allow the company to save money on infrastructure costs. Hence Nicaraguans, and to a lesser extent Guanacastecans, accepted hygiene and living conditions intolerable to most Costa Rican or Panamanian laborers. Not unlike the Guaymí immigrants to the plantation, barefoot Nicaraguan day laborers have never lived with electricity or running water; they did not automatically require their employers to provide such "luxuries." Living and working conditions unsatisfactory to the Costa Rican banana worker were considered normal by the Nicaraguan day laborer.⁵ For example, on a bus heading to Limón a Guanacastecan asked me what conditions were like in Sixaola. When I described the isolation and mediocre living conditions of the plantation, he interrupted with a note of relief, "Oh that doesn't bother me; I'm from a really ugly community, far from the road. I'm used to all that. How much are they paying?" Significantly, when I described these same living conditions to Costa Ricans from the Highlands their reaction was just the reverse: "God forbid. I would never work there no matter how much they paid."

Non-Guanacastecan Costa Rican Hispanics in the Bocas Division had a reputation for being mediocre laborers. The alternative sources of income and employment available to them, especially to those from the Central Highlands, rendered banana work unattractive. When the Sixaola District was reopened to banana production in the late 1970s,

Costa Rican Hispanics refused employment under the arduous working conditions offered by the transnational. Although the company arranged through the Ministry of Labor for bus loads of Costa Ricans to be imported from the Central Highlands, few remained for more than a few months. According to the manager of the division, every three months there was a one-hundred-percent turnover of Costa Rican workers (even the Guanacastecans) on the Sixaola project. This turnover is amply documented by the internal correspondence of the Labor Relations Office of the Sixaola District: "The people [Costa Rican Hispanics] who come here in search of work do not like the place because they expect to encounter in this isolated region at least minimal facilities such as housing, transport, stores. They arrive from far away and they are familiar with other zones in the country. Therefore, when they encounter such difficult living conditions, they choose instead to return to their homes or to search out the banana zones in Guapiles and Río Frío" (SDF: Brenes to Carles, May 13, 1981).

The company gave up trying to entice Costa Ricans and instead illegally imported Guaymí Amerindians into its Sixaola District labor force (see chapter 9).⁶ The engineer in charge of the initial infrastructural preparations in Sixaola told me:

When we opened Sixaola we had to grab ahold of the Panamanian Indians 'cause they were the only ones on hand. We couldn't get one single person from Limón. I went to the Highlands—Cartago, San José, Limón—all over looking for carpenters and workers and no one wanted to come. Impossible! They're used to working with lots of facilities. And the prices they wanted to be paid! In opening a division, in reality you got to use jungle men. People who are capable of knocking down trees and disposed to that kind of life. Nowadays they want to have the bathroom working. But when we open divisions, it's in thatched huts and deep in the jungle with access only by mule or hiking. You have to really be ready to struggle with your bare arms, 'cause there's nothing there. You have to control the rivers, the floods, the bridges, the railroad, with no facilities, without anything. And the Cartagos—as we call the people here [in the Central Highlands of Costa Rica]—are no good. They just can't hold up to anything.

The few Hispanics who did remain working in Sixaola in the late 1970s were primarily Guanacastecans, Nicaraguans, and Salvadorans.

Another disadvantage of Costa Rican workers from management's perspective was their high level of literacy and their sophistication with respect to their legal rights. Merely the fact of workers knowing that a labor code exists greatly reduces their exploitability. Costa Rican banana workers had an advanced educational level; I frequently met laborers (even Guanacastecans) who had completed their high school

education. Most Costa Ricans, therefore, were able to read the labor code, hire a lawyer, or write a letter of complaint to the Ministry of Labor when their legal rights were abridged. An elderly North American company official who had worked on almost all of the company's subsidiaries throughout Latin America told me that the reason Costa Ricans were "such lousy workers" was that "they are too damn educated." Another North American official based in Honduras who overheard this comment agreed enthusiastically, adding that "his" workers were much better than Costa Ricans because so many of them were illiterate: "You see, what you need to make a good worker is lots of underdevelopment. That's why Hondurans make such good workers. Just look around the country a little and you'll see why." Already in the 1920s, an observer noted a dramatic contrast between Costa Rican banana workers and those from the less economically developed Central American nations: "Costa Rican peasants are different in habits and attitudes from illiterate *mestizo* (half-breed) peons, accustomed to the semifeudal conditions prevailing on Guatemalan fincas, as well as from impoverished Honduran mestizos, accustomed to living upon the meager diet of corn and beans raised on rugged hillsides" (Kepner 1936: 160). Of course the high expectations of Costa Rican laborers were only relative. Although they were reputed to be among the most demanding workers with respect to living conditions in Central America, in fact, they tolerated a housing infrastructure that would be considered substandard by workers in the industrialized nations. I described the living conditions of the Sixaola District in some detail in chapter 1; suffice it to add here that in the house in which I took my meals during the first weeks of my fieldwork twenty-one people slept in two small bedrooms and a living room, which also doubled as a canteen.

THE WORST WORKERS: PANAMANIAN

Panamanians are universally recognized as the "worst workers" on the plantation. As early as the 1910s management distinctly preferred Costa Ricans to Panamanians (cf. BDA: Kyes to Chittenden, July 23, 1918). The company files abound with criticisms of Panamanian labor quality especially during the years from 1930 through 1960 when the Panamanian government was especially adamant in pressuring the transnational to hire more Panamanians and fewer foreigners because of the high rates of unemployment in the Canal Zone (cf. BDA: Blair to Jacome, Sept. 27 1933; *La Nación*, Jan. 28, 1952; *Panama Tribune*, May 27, 1951). From the company's perspective, workers from the Canal Zone—whether black or Hispanic—have always been the most unsatisfactory. Canal

workers were accustomed to working conditions far superior to those the company was willing to offer (BDA: Munch to Moore, Sept. 29, 1954). Despite pressure from local newspapers, the company was generally successful in convincing Panamanian government officials that the underrepresentation of Panamanian nationals in the Bocas labor force was due not to low wages and poor living conditions but rather to the "worthlessness" of their compatriots. An example is the report of the company's agent in Panama City on a party he attended with government officials:

[They] had had plenty of drinks and [were] feeling no pain. A little later the Secretary of the Ministry of Labor and the former head of the Bolsa de Trabajo [Employment Agency] and some newspaper men joined us. The conversation got switched to labor and [the] former head of [the] Bolsa de Trabajo told everyone that it was not [the] Company's fault that we had so many foreigners working in Almirante. That he had tried to get laborers to go there but they went on one ship and returned on the next. They all agreed that labor from the City and Colon were absolutely worthless. (BDA: Bill to Bocas manager, Nov. 2, 1950)

Whenever unemployment levels in Panama rose, however, the failure of the company to employ Panamanian nationals became a sensitive diplomatic issue. The company files are full of confidential letters describing the president's mood and analyzing possible tactics to avoid having to hire Panamanians in the Armuelles and Bocas divisions: "Mr. Holcombe [the Armuelles Division manager] explained [to the president] that we have had very little success with laborers recruited in the vicinity of the Canal Zone. None of these men is accustomed to farm work and out of a number of groups of 15 [to] 25 each brought to this province in the past 3 [to] 4 years not over 2 or 3 men have stayed and developed into reasonably satisfactory agricultural laborers" (BDA: Munch to Moore, Feb. 27, 1954).

Even if the company had not been reluctant to hire former Canal Zone workers, Panamanians from the capital and from Colón probably would not have deigned to work under the conditions offered in Bocas. As figure 3 indicates, the vast majority of Panamanians from the capital working in the Bocas Division were at the higher echelons of management. Panamanian Hispanics (even Chiricanos) were so consistent in their refusal of low-prestige tasks and poor working conditions that the percentage of Panamanians performing a given task provides an indication of the status of that task within the plantation's occupational hierarchy. For example, only 9 Panamanians out of a total of 277 foreign workers were employed in the cacao farms of the Sixaola District on the Costa Rican side of the border in 1951 (BDA: Myrick to Mais, Nov. 22,

1951). By the company's own accounts, the Sixaola cacao groves were by far the most undesirable place to work in the entire Bocas Division during the 1950s.

POLITICAL ORIENTATION

In contrast to Amerindians and blacks, Hispanics were reputed to be "vulnerable to union ideas and communism." Historically, whenever Hispanics have entered the labor force in large numbers, they have tended to initiate union movements and strikes. For example, during the early 1950s in the Sixaola District Hispanics (primarily Guanacastecans and Nicaraguans) replaced the superannuated West Indian cacao workforce.⁷ In 1957, faced with the mounting militancy of its newly unionized, increasingly Hispanic labor force, the transnational leased all of its cacao groves in the Sixaola District to former farm administrators and foremen, thereby destroying the union movement before it spread to the Panamanian half of the division.

The Sixaola District strike of January 1982 is the most dramatic example of the different levels of politicization between Costa Rican Hispanics and Amerindians. As was noted in chapter 9 in the discussion of Guaymí economic exploitation, Amerindian workers were replaced by Hispanics in the Sixaola District in mid-1981 when it was suddenly cheaper to hire Costa Ricans instead of Panamanian Amerindians due to the devaluation of the Costa Rican currency. A strike erupted a few months after the replacement of the Amerindians by Hispanics in Sixaola (see figure 6). According to the union leader who organized the strike, it was a virtually spontaneous movement. The laborers were so dissatisfied with the poor working and living conditions that in two weeks the union organizer signed up over half of the workers for membership in the new union. He claimed that the workers themselves precipitated the strike against his advice.

The strike lasted two months, and was one of the most heavily repressed labor disturbances in Costa Rica in the 1980s.⁸ Two hundred members of the Rural Guard protected the strikebreakers the company had imported en masse. On several occasions the Rural Guard opened fire into protesting crowds of workers and onlookers.⁹ According to official reports one striker, Narciso Morales Valdelomar, was killed and two people were wounded, including Morales Valdelomar's five-year-old daughter.¹⁰

The company successfully broke the strike by firing and blacklisting the majority of the workforce (75 percent of the 600 workers according to the superintendent of agriculture) and by busing in some 400 re-

placements. The Rural Guard accompanied by foremen and farm administrators broke down the doors of the striking workers still living in the company barracks and threw their possessions "off company property" into trucks, which carted them away. Over 100 workers were jailed and many were severely beaten.¹¹ In the provincial capital in Limón the family members of the imprisoned strikers seized the cathedral, but the company and the government refused to compromise.

By the time of my fieldwork, despite the dramatic political mobilization that had occurred during the January strike, there was no significant movement among the workers to reestablish a militant union in the Sixaola District. Many strikers had become squatters on company-owned land on the periphery of the plantation and had joined a militant national peasant union (FENAC).¹² The economic crisis prevailing in the country deepened this demobilization; there were few alternatives to banana work and an increasingly large pool of unemployed throughout Costa Rica was available to the transnational. The national economic crisis was so severe that for the first time significant numbers of urban Costa Ricans from the Central Highlands began migrating to the plantation. Company officials explained to me that "the crisis has helped us a great deal in combating the reds and stabilizing the workforce." Indeed, the militant labor union movement suffered throughout the country as workers became increasingly chary of jeopardizing their one source of permanent employment.

Although management considered Hispanics in general to be politically volatile, differences in political orientation are identifiable among the various Hispanic national, regional, and ethnic subgroups. To a large extent, there is a direct correlation between the tendency of a particular group to mobilize politically and its exploitability. The same factors (poverty and leverage within local class struggles) that made workers tolerant of low wages and poor working conditions demobilized them politically. Subjective, cultural factors, however, also contributed to shaping political patterns within the various Hispanic ethnic groups. The best example is provided by comparing Nicaraguans (and also Guanacastecans) to Costa Rican Central Highlanders. As noted in the previous chapter, Nicaraguans had a reputation for being a wild people (*gente brava*), known to be more prone to violence and less susceptible to repressive intimidation than were Costa Ricans.

Although labor organizers, management, and the workers themselves treated Nicaraguan combativity as an innate "racial" characteristic, there is a historical, structural basis for this "national character." The history of Nicaragua is perhaps the most violent of all the Central American nations, characterized by civil wars and extended military

dictatorships. In contrast to El Salvador, where the oligarchy and the military systematized their repression through paramilitary groups and rural community spies (thereby creating a population known for its polite, cautious style of interpersonal interaction), Nicaragua developed no intelligence networks of equivalent sophistication. Instead, a brutal but less well-organized (and only slightly less bloody) level of violence and repression has prevailed. The repeated U.S. invasions and the prolonged civil wars that have plagued Nicaragua since colonial times have resulted in a confrontational and violent style of interpersonal relationships. During a one-week visit to Nicaraguan banana plantations, I witnessed several child beatings, a bitter hair-pulling, eye-gouging, nail-scratching fight between two women, and frequent displays of violent bravado among the young men. In contrast, during nine months of barracks life in the Sixaola District in Costa Rica I saw relatively few incidences of interpersonal violence. The Nicaraguan propensity for violence and bravado assumes a political dimension, rendering them amenable to militant confrontations. For example, the local representative of the Costa Rican peasant union, which had organized the invasion of several thousand hectares of company land on the periphery of the Sixaola District, told me that "the Nicas are magnificent for when we have to block the road or need people to shout at the police." A Nicaraguan squatter who had been advised by the peasant union's lawyer to avoid public political activity because of the risk of deportation confided in me, "These Ticos are pussies; they're scared of everything. They live in misery yet they're thankful for everything. They just don't have the balls to defend themselves."

In contrast to Nicaraguans (and Guanacastecans), Costa Ricans from the Central Highlands have a formal, polite style of interaction. For example, the formal "you" (*usted*) is employed more frequently in Costa Rica than in any other Central American nation. On crowded buses, Costa Ricans say "excuse me" instead of pushing. They favor peace and nonviolence. Any disruption of the national tranquility is frowned upon even by the poorest, most exploited, marginal sectors of the population.

Significantly, Costa Rican history, though not devoid of civil war and violence, has been considerably less strife-ridden than that of its neighbors. In fact, as early as 1909, a Costa Rican scholar celebrated the nation's innate peacefulness: "[We are] a people of peace, an honest, professional people who obey and respect the law, a country where the revolutions of our neighbors of South and Central America are unknown" (Pacheco 1908:8).¹¹ Most important, the upper classes have developed Costa Rica economically and politically with less violent repression than have their counterparts in Nicaragua or El Salvador. Al-

though occasionally union leaders in Costa Rica are killed, jailed, and beaten by the security forces, the status quo has been maintained in recent years more by co-option and ideological hegemony than by coercion.¹⁴

The Costa Rican ideology of natural peacefulness assumed an almost xenophobic, racist dynamic. The press often blamed major crimes and political confrontations on foreigners, especially Nicaraguans.¹⁵ This jingoism has been especially severe during banana worker strikes (cf. *La Nación*, Sept. 19, 1982). An editorial comment in Costa Rica's largest circulating newspaper noted: "We Costa Ricans love to deceive ourselves. It's an escape from the '*mea culpa*.' Thus every time a serious crime occurs, the question immediately arises, 'How did they speak?' And it is like heavenly bells to our ears when we hear the answer, 'They spoke like Colombians, like Nicas, like Gringos, like Cubans or like Salvadorans.' 'Ay! Thank God they aren't Ticos!' is the exclamation followed by a deep sigh of relief" (*La Nación*, June 20, 1981: 15A, cited in Edelman 1982:n.p.).

From a practical political point of view the Costa Rican commitment to national tranquillity inhibits militant, confrontational political mobilization. This observation becomes especially apparent if one compares the actions of Nicaraguan expatriate banana workers to those of Costa Ricans in the 1930s. During the 1934 banana strike in Limón, the militancy of the Nicaraguan workers actually emerged as a serious problem for the Costa Rican strike leadership. Arnoldo Ferreto, a Communist party senator and one of the leaders of the 1934 movement, wrote in a pamphlet of how he misjudged the "spirit" of the banana workers at a rally and accidentally aroused them to the point of insurrection (Ferreto n.d.: 3). He attributed the fervor of the crowd to the high proportion of Nicaraguans present: "There was a subjective factor pushing us toward violence. At that time a high percentage of the banana workers were Nicaraguans and many had had military experience: some in the civil wars between liberals and conservatives, others as soldiers or even officers in the Sandinista army. A majority of those who raised their machetes to demand that we take over the main villages in the zone were Nicaraguans, and among them were many veterans of the Sandinista struggle" (Ferreto n.d.: 4). Almost fifty years later, I heard Nicaraguan expatriates complaining that the reason the 1982 Sixaola strike had failed was because "the damn Tico leadership wouldn't give us guns."

Differences in patterns of political mobilization have also been regional. For example, the superintendent of the Sixaola District who was responsible for importing some 400 strikebreakers in early 1982 from four different provinces of Costa Rica told me that he had made a mis-

take in his recruitment. "If we had brought down Guanacastecans to begin with, even though the transport costs are higher, we would have saved money. None of the San Carleños, the Cartagos, or even those from Turrialba stayed." I interviewed several Guanacastecans who ridiculed the strikebreakers from the other regions of the country for "letting themselves get scared away" by the strikers.

Management has categorically blacklisted some regions of Costa Rica as "red zones." For example, people born in Puntarenas Province were routinely refused employment on the assumption that they had been "infected by union ideas." Similarly, workers who had worked on other plantations were automatically refused employment no matter where they were from. On several occasions during my fieldwork workers were fired several weeks after being hired after it was observed that they worked extremely fast and efficiently.

Of all the regional ethnic groups on the Bocas plantation, the Chiricanos have the strongest reputation for being "communists" and labor union organizers. Company officials told me that the personality of Chiricanos was mean, vicious, anti-American, and communistic: "Chiriquí Province is the base of communism for Panama. All the people trained by the Russians are from Chiriquí." Workers confirmed this stereotype, repeating the phrase: "Chiricanos like to strike, Indians like to work." In the early 1960s and again in the early 1970s, in response to the rising union movement in Bocas, the company began denying employment to "*cédula fours*," the nickname for persons born in Chiriquí because the province's identity card begins with the number four.

Although it was illegal according to the Panamanian labor code to discriminate against workers because of their region of origin, company officials purposefully broadcasted that Chiricanos were blacklisted in the 1960s and 1970s as a way of discouraging people from adopting political attitudes similar to those of the Chiricanos. Chiricanos were supposedly the backbone of the militant faction of the union movement. The company promoted the stereotype that Chiricanos came to Bocas del Toro merely to become union leaders and foment trouble. During my fieldwork, management also publicized that it was reducing operations on its subsidiary in Chiriquí Province (the Armuelles Division) because of the "intransigence of the Chiricano union."

The strategy of isolating Chiricanos as "communist troublemakers," has been largely successful.¹⁶ Many workers in Bocas del Toro felt that the Chiricanos had jeopardized their job security by introducing outside ideologies into the labor movement. When the transnational fired a worker for being a red union supporter, the blame was often leveled against the union organizer for provoking the firing. Repeatedly I was

told, "The red union might be good; the problem is that it gets you fired." I was almost never told that the company had broken the law or committed an injustice by firing a worker because of his or her political orientation.

THE ADVANTAGE OF FOREIGNERS

A major disadvantage with Chiricanos from management's perspective is that they are Panamanian nationals protected by Panamanian law. Foreign workers, on the other hand, can be deported or intimidated into submission when they become involved in labor movements. The massive deportation of Hondurans in the 1940s, when abacá production was at its height, is a good example. Most Honduran laborers had previously worked on the transnational's subsidiary in their home country. When confronted with the underdeveloped infrastructure of the Bocas Division, they staged strikes and work stoppages. An internal company report analyzing Honduran labor concluded that the "importation of labor from Honduras has been most unsuccessful" and advised that company officials in Honduras "screen any new men that we might be authorized to import" to verify that they were "acceptable to management" (BDA: Moore to Mais, Sept. 21, 1954). The confrontations with Honduran strikers had been tense: "About two hundred closed in on Farm Eight headquarters demanding higher contract rates in the various abacá farm operations. . . . They stopped all others on this farm from working and destroyed some pack saddles that had been made ready for work. They then moved in a body on Luzon Farm to threaten workers there, but were intercepted by police who disarmed them and brought them all to the Bocas del Toro Cuartel [military jail]" (BDA: Myrick to Aycock, Dec. 7, 1946).

In 1951 alone, 208 Hondurans or 46 percent of those imported that year were "repatriated . . . because they were unsuited for work in Almirante, for one reason or another" (BDA: Moore to Diebold, Feb. 6, 1952).

Elderly Honduran workers claimed that, whenever they had protested low wages or staged work stoppages, the company paid a few trusted foremen to cut down several acres of abacá at night and then demanded that the immigration authorities repatriate the "culprits."¹⁷ In the post-World War II period hundreds of workers (mostly Nicaraguans and Hondurans) were deported from Bocas for union organizing, or merely for complaining about working conditions. Between July 1958 and June 1959, for example, 340 workers were repatriated; 39 percent were Nicaraguans and 23 percent were Hondurans (BDA: List of

Repatriations by Nationality, June 30, 1959). Although Nicaraguans were repatriated in larger absolute numbers, Hondurans were deported at a higher per capita rate (BDA: Myrick to Aycock, Dec. 7, 1946).

The strategy of deporting foreigners on a massive scale during strikes has been characteristic of all the transnational's subsidiaries throughout Central America. In the Limón Division, for example, hundreds of Nicaraguans were deported during the 1934 strike. Some of these deportees had lived in Costa Rica for over twenty-five years and had established legal residence. During the 1934 strike management promoted a xenophobic propaganda campaign in the newspapers, exaggerating the role of foreigners in the movement: "It is urgent now to persecute all foreign elements upon whom has fallen even the slightest suspicion of having taken part in the revolutionary plot that has been incubating among the Costa Rican communoids [*comunizantes*] . . . who are constituted primarily by a few kikes [*Polacos*]" (*Defensa Nacional*, Oct. 13, 1934: 3; see also *La Tribuna*, Sept. 12, 1934: 1, Sept. 14, 1934: 5; and Oct. 2, 1934: 1; *La Hora*, Sept. 14, 1934: 1, 3; *La Prensa Libre*, Sept. 19, 1934: 1, 4; *El Herald*, Sept. 13, 1934: 4, cited in Sibaja 1983: Appendix 2; see also Seligson 1980: 72). The Nicaraguan consul in Limón "recommend[ed] his compatriots to abstain from participating in subversive acts in the Atlantic zone," threatening them with "ignominy, expulsion, and perhaps even death" should they join the strikers (*La Voz del Atlántico*, Sept. 15, 1934: 1). As noted in the discussion of the political restraints placed on workers of West Indian descent during the 1934 Limón strike (see chapter 7), the local newspapers repeatedly reminded foreigners of their vulnerability to deportation and announced the imminent implementation of new immigration censuses to "round up all aliens who participated in any of the subversive acts, which took place during the recent strike movement" (*Voice of the Atlantic*, Sept. 8, 1934: 4).

Newspaper editorials advised Costa Rican strikers to recant and "wake up to their error at having accompanied these [foreign] elements, who are fomenting depredation . . . in our fatherland which offers them such hospitality" (*La Voz del Atlántico*, Sept. 15, 1934). Public opinion became so incensed against the alleged Nicaraguan strikeleaders in 1934 that the Communist party newspaper was compelled to publish a defensive rebuttal entitled "The Control of the Strike Movement Continues in Our Hands," and admonished readers not to fall prey to the "stupid animosity that the ruling class of Costa Rica has fomented against . . . 'bellicose Nicas'" (*Trabajo*, Aug. 24, 1934).¹⁸

The massive deportation of Nicaraguan laborers was also a regular feature of the many strikes during the 1950s on the Costa Rican plan-

tations on the Pacific Coast (*Relatos de un Viejo Liniero del Atlántico* n.d.: 12). In the Bocas Division the single largest-scale deportation of foreigners occurred during the 1960 strike when hundreds of foreigners (mostly Nicaraguans) were summarily flown back to their countries of origin merely for showing sympathy toward the strike movement. A Chiricano who had been a union leader at the time told me that foreigners were the hardest workers to organize because foreigners only marginally involved in the union movement were deported. Company archives include confidential documents revealing how management harassed a prominent union activist by targeting his foreign-born fiancée for deportation (BDA: Smith to Cantrell, Jan. 9, 1961).

During my fieldwork, foreign workers in Bocas continued to fear arbitrary deportation merely on suspicion of union sympathy. In the 1982 Sixaola District strike (on the Costa Rican side of the Bocas Division), the company expelled every single foreigner (mostly Panamanians) within the first week, regardless of whether or not they supported the strike (*La Nación*, Jan. 21, 1982: 8). Ironically, even Costa Ricans were "deported" from the Sixaola District. For example, a Costa Rican judge ordered the leader of the strike movement never to return to the municipality of Talamanca. The same judge ordered three other leaders "to return to their home villages in Guanacaste and never, under any pretext, return to this province [Limón]" (SDF: Carranza to Rural Guard, Jan. 16, 1982). Similarly, as happened during the 1934 Limón Division strike, the Costa Rican press ran articles and editorials emphasizing the predominance of foreigners in the Sixaola strike movement (*La Nación*, Jan. 22, 1982: 14; Jan. 19, 1982: 8; *La Prensa Libre*, Feb. 15, 1982: 17).

As noted in the discussion of the political constraints faced by black laborers in the 1940s, even during periods of labor tranquillity foreigners were under pressure to maintain good relations with their employers since they often depended on them to intercede in their favor before immigration authorities. Through the early 1950s the company continued to obtain semilegal permits for hundreds of Nicaraguans and Costa Ricans on the Panamanian side of the Bocas Division each year (BDA: Bocas manager to Moore, Feb. 25, 1952).

Although foreigners represented only 3 percent of the day labor force during my fieldwork (see figure 2), their dependent relationship on the company persisted. For example, in October 1982 when Costa Rican immigration officials were pressuring the company to maintain the Sixaola District workforce within the national labor code's limit of 10-percent foreigners, the head of labor relations for the Bocas Division sent a handwritten note to the Sixaola District labor relations supervisor

asking, "Which ones [of the foreigners] is it worth it for the Company to take measures with the authorities to retain?" (SDF: Carles to Zeledón, Oct. n.d., 1982).

Another important factor that prevented many Central American foreign workers in the banana industry from becoming involved in the labor movement was the political convulsions in their natal lands. Many foreign banana workers in both Costa Rica and Panama had been forced to emigrate from their home countries because of political violence and indiscriminate repression. This has especially been the case for Nicaraguans, Salvadorans, and Guatemalans. Nicaragua has been consistently plagued by political strife. In the 1920s and 1930s it was convulsed by a prolonged guerrilla war against U.S. troops led by General Augusto César Sandino. Following Sandino's assassination, the country was subjected for forty-five years to one of Latin America's most repressive dictatorships. In 1979 this dictatorship was overthrown following a violent revolutionary struggle costing some 40,000 lives. Through the 1980s Nicaragua has, once again, been plunged into a destructive civil war fomented by the United States government. The political situation in El Salvador has been equally violent. In 1932, at the same time that Sandino's guerrilla army in Nicaragua was battling North American marines, a violent peasant rebellion erupted in El Salvador. In the repression following the abortive uprising between 18,000 and 30,000 persons were killed in a matter of weeks. Today, El Salvador continues to be convulsed by guerrilla warfare and brutal state repression.¹⁹

As early as the 1910s, and escalating through the 1930s, many Nicaraguans and Salvadorans²⁰ emigrating to United Fruit Company plantations in Costa Rica, Honduras, and Panama were fleeing political persecution. Many of these immigrants did not dare involve themselves in activities that might lead to their deportation since they risked death or imprisonment in their natal countries. Many Nicaraguan workers in the Limón Division during the 1930s were former soldiers in General Sandino's guerrilla army who had fled the country when he was assassinated. A Costa Rican leader of the 1934 strike told me:

Those people [political refugees] were really appreciated [*eran muy ap-
etecidos*] by the company. Because there was no strong legislation or control,
the company could just obtain a special permission for them to stay in Costa
Rica so long as they were employed by them. So they had to work for a lower
salary without daring to get involved in protest movements for fear of be-
ing deported to Nicaragua. Since they were people fleeing the dictatorship
there, that made them relatively meek. A lot of them were Sandinistas or
deserters from the National Guard. What happened in 1934 was that they

had accumulated too much anger and that's why they exploded more than anyone else.

Even those workers who had no political antecedents at home were in danger should they be deported for "subversive activities." A 1931 pamphlet circulated on the United Fruit Company's plantations in Panama polemically denounced the displacement of Panamanian workers by politically vulnerable exiles: "The company cannot find Panamanian workers willing to compete with the urgent necessities of exiled workers from Latin America. That they are exiles or expatriates and have arrived without legal documents, defenseless in the clutches of the United Fruit Company, requires them to remain in the company's concentration camps" (Solano 1931: 12).

During my fieldwork, political turmoil continued to contribute toward providing the transnational with a hard-working, docile labor force. In fact, in October 1980 the company negotiated with the United Nations High Commission on Refugees about the possibility of employing 150 Salvadoran refugees in the Sixaola District (MLF: Agreement Signed between Cederberg and Castañeda, Oct. 1980).²¹ Although Salvadorans never migrated to the Bocas Division in large numbers, Nicaraguans did. The turmoil in Nicaragua has been so intense for so many years that there were Nicaraguan refugees of diametrically opposed political orientations (both Somocistas and Sandinistas) on the Bocas plantation.²² There were even Guanacastecans on the plantation who had been obliged to flee their home communities along the border because of the overflow of violence from Nicaragua.

Another advantage to the transnational of maintaining a high proportion of foreigners within its labor force was the internal divisions that national diversity foments. Nationalist and regionalist rivalries among Hispanic groups have historically fragmented worker solidarity and have focused frustrations and angers into apolitical channels. This is not to imply that the company necessarily actively foments these nationalist antagonisms. As in the case of racism among blacks, Hispanics, and Amerindians, national/regional chauvinism among Hispanics existed independently of the company's machinations.

These antagonisms were especially prevalent from World War II through the early 1950s when the Bocas Division was, as a Honduran worker described it to me, "a potpourri of nations [*un sancocho de pueblos*]." The deepest tension was between Hondurans and Nicaraguans who fought constantly. I was told numerous tales of violent Saturday night brawls between Honduran and Nicaraguan workers that ended in bloodshed. These accounts have assumed almost legendary

significance. Elderly Hondurans told me of ferocious machete duels between Honduran and Nicaraguan men over insignificant insults. Typically, when a Honduran related the tale it would end with a gravely wounded Honduran overcoming his Nicaraguan opponent and parting his head in two or chopping it off with one swing of his machete. When a Nicaraguan was the narrator, the version would be virtually identical except that it was the wounded Nicaraguan who would emerge alive after killing his Honduran opponent.

National chauvinism permeated the frequent labor stoppages of the 1940s and 1950s. Honduran informants repeatedly told me that during their protests over labor conditions neither the Nicaraguans nor the blacks supported them: "We were pure Hondurans in that strike. We were always the most combative. No, no, the Nicas never stood by us." These divisions dominated even the most politicized strike movements. For example, one of the chief grievances raised by the primarily Chiricano and Bocatoran leadership of the 1960 Bocas Division strike was the "injustice" of being bossed by Honduran or Nicaraguan foremen. The preoccupation with the nationality of one's immediate supervisor remained a subject of frequent conversation and complaint among banana workers. It played an important role in defusing the class content of worker demands, channeling the contradictions between labor and management into a nationalist chauvinist framework devoid of class content.

Nationalism has not always been demobilizing, however. During specific historical conjunctures nationalist sentiment has served to promote solidarity in action precisely because it cuts across class lines, a sentiment shared, to a lesser or greater extent, by everyone born in the same country. Consequently, even wealthy Panamanians in the capital who have never even seen a banana plantation have on occasion mobilized in support of banana workers when their plight was framed in terms of the abuse of "children of the fatherland [*hijos de la patria*]" by "rapacious foreigners." During the work stoppages of the 1940s, the sense of being foreigners in a foreign land helped the Honduran abacá harvesters maintain a unity of action, at least within their own ranks. Similarly nationalist outrage in the 1960 strike to a large extent enabled Hispanic and black Panamanians to overcome their racism and to operate cohesively in opposition to the "*gringos*."²³ On several occasions, I heard foremen and even middle-level administrative personnel complain in nationalist terms of the "lack of heart" of the "*gringo*" owners of the transnational. During the Sixaola District strike in 1982, several administration-level employees joined the workers, expressing their dissatisfaction with management in nationalist terms. A United Fruit Com-

pany management employee in the 1920s pointed out the transnational's awareness of the danger of nationalism among its administration-level workers: "In Costa Rica it was the company's policy to avoid as much as possible putting nationals in high positions, because of their divided allegiance in disputes with national governments" (Kepner 1936: 176-77).

The transnational has largely resolved the contradiction of interests between profits and patriotism among its management-level employees by cultivating "denationalized" Hispanics—what the dependency literature refers to as a "*comprador* class" or the "*lumpenbourgeoisie*" (Frank 1972). Upper-level managerial positions on United Brands subsidiaries were filled by a cohort of U.S.-educated, Anglophile Hispanics. In the Bocas Division at the time of my fieldwork the superintendent of agriculture was a Panamanian-born Hispanic raised on the plantation. He was a foreigner in his own land. As a child, he had attended the company's "American school," beginning in the first grade; he later won a company scholarship to a United States college at which he eventually completed a graduate degree. Since primary school, he has celebrated only North American holidays, played North American sports (golf, tennis, and bowling), and learned North American history. He has always sung the United States' national anthem on the Fourth of July, and has carved pumpkins for Halloween. His English was flawless, punctuated by the appropriate slang and mannerisms. When I left the plantation he was engaged to a North American schoolteacher who did not speak any Spanish despite having spent two years at the American school in Bocas.²⁴

In the process of placing the economic interests of the transnational corporation above those of their own country, Panamanian and Costa Rican management employees denigrate their own national culture. They were distinctly ideologically dominated in a manner comparable to the internalized racism among a significant sector of black middle-level employees. They aspired to be members of white Anglo-Saxon culture. If they did not subscribe to the superiority of the United States, they would be fired for being untrustworthy. Workers often referred with disgust to their countrymen in management positions as being "more gringo than the gringos" or "white-tailed blackbirds [*rabiblan-cos*]" (Camacho 1982: 104). Economist Frank LaBarge traveled through all the United Fruit Company's Central American plantations in the 1950s, noting:

The Latin American employees tend to identify themselves with the North Americans who are their immediate associates. Many will even say, "we are Americans too." . . . This group studies English assiduously, for English is

regarded as the language of prestige and authority. . . . In extreme cases a Latin American employee may be insulted if one who knows English persists in addressing him in Spanish. . . . As one mother irately told a school-teacher: "My son's name is Joe, not José!" (LaBarge 1959: 213-14)

The fetishization of North American culture was so extreme that on several occasions I saw North American supervisors express openly racist sentiments toward Hispanic culture in front of Hispanic colleagues who showed no evidence of having been insulted.

Admiration for North American culture and self-denigration were most pronounced among management-level Hispanic employees, but it also existed among working-class Hispanics and contributed to a sense of resignation and political demobilization. A banana worker introduced me to his dark-skinned daughter saying, "She looks like a *cholita* but she is really very nice [*parece cholita pero es pura vida*]." A Guanacastecan worker asked me, "Is it true that North Americans are the first in the world for intelligence?" Another Guanacastecan told me, "We are just a disorganized people with bad habits; we need more influence from people like you." I was frequently personally embarrassed when workers approached me and proudly asserted with no provocation whatsoever that they loved Americans. One elderly, impoverished Chiricano who had lost his youth and his health working for the transnational was especially unflagging in his adulation: "I love the *gringos*. They give us life. Oh yes, the *gringos* have really helped us out. The *gringos* are never bad with anyone."

In Costa Rica adulation of North America and white supremacy in general has emerged as an internalized national ideology, referred to in the scholarly literature as the "white legend" (cf. Creedman 1977: x, cited in Edelman 1985: 20; Seligson 1980: 9 ff.). Costa Rican Hispanics, regardless of their skin complexion, call themselves whites even though by North American standards they would be considered brown, or even black. The racist image of an "ethnically homogeneous, white Costa Rica" has been repeatedly reproduced in the scholarly and popular literature (cf. Waibel 1939: 528; Sancho 1982[1935]). Costa Rican intellectuals and even foreign scholars have often treated violence, radical politics, and revolutionary movements as specific to the "mestizo racial stock," of the "less cultured" peoples predominating in the neighboring countries.

FOURTEEN / Conclusion: How Important Is Ethnicity?

Dealing with workers is like treating a woman. You stick your finger into her and it's a bad thing to do but it's also sort of good too. You understand what I mean? It's all psychology. You can send any worker happily diving down a dark gopher hole or wading through the filthiest drainage ditch if you just treat him right.

—Bocas Division foreman, 1982

I concluded the preface by expressing dissatisfaction with an understanding of ethnicity's articulation with class which takes refuge in the ambiguous catchall notion of a "dialectical relationship." Ethnicity, and ideology more generally, need to be defined dynamically with social processes of confrontation so that they can become an organic aspect of class relations or, more broadly, of material social reality. This chapter begins by offering examples of potential nonethnic explanations for some of the data and dynamics presented in the previous chapters in order to reaffirm the importance of ethnicity by eradicating the analytic distinction between ideology and material reality in our understanding of history and contemporary social process. On a less theoretical (and more phenomenological/political) level the best "proof" of ethnicity's crucial role in structuring not only the details of the labor process but also social relations more generally is the persistence, growth, and changing meanings of racism.

THE UNSATISFACTORY THEORETICAL DISTINCTION

Repeatedly during my fieldwork I questioned whether my analysis of the politics of labor control on the plantation might overstate the impor-

tance of ethnicity; I worried whether most of what I observed could be accounted for without formal reference to ethnicity. Because ethnicity dominated popular discourse in Bocas del Toro, I wondered whether, as a participant/observer in an explicitly racist context, I was merely over-emphasizing popular discourse. Perhaps the most damning evidence of my overembroilment in ethnicity is that company officials were comfortable with my topic. The transnational had a vested interest in maintaining ethnicity rather than concrete economic issues in the forefront of public discussion. Partially to compensate I systematically collected the information outlined in chapter 2 on the international market and political forces that frame all social relations on the plantation, including ethnicity. In this final qualification of the importance of ethnicity, I focus on the details of the local class struggle rather than on the global framework of international constraints already outlined in chapter 2.

The polarized relationship between the Guaymí and Hispanics is the most important ethnic nexus to reevaluate critically. While interviewing union leaders about the Amerindian-Hispanic schism within the labor movement, I often felt as if I was succumbing to the company's ploy of framing concrete political and economic struggles in a mystified ethnic arena. The antagonism between Amerindian and Hispanic may be to a large extent self-generating. It reproduces itself merely because the general population kept repeating that "Hispanics are communists and the Guaymí like to work hard." When Guaymí workers, for example, were deciding whom to vote for in a union election, they based their choice primarily on the statement constantly repeated around them: "The white slate is for Indians; the red slate is for Chiricanos." Management's most effective manipulation of ethnic antagonisms, therefore, was merely to repeat that they exist. The "common sense" notion that Hispanics hate the Guaymí (and vice versa) ensured a divided union movement and reproduced the vicious cycle of escalating ethnic hostility.

A close scrutiny of voting patterns and political allegiance, however, belies the Amerindians' categorical rejection of the independent union movement. Although more Guaymí than Hispanics usually voted for the promanagement union slate, many Guaymí supported the independent labor movement; and conversely, many Hispanics did not. The Amerindians did not universally hate communism as company officials would have had one believe. On several occasions (as noted in chapter 10) Communist party candidates for the Panamanian National Assembly won provincial elections in Bocas del Toro by mobilizing the Guaymí vote. Furthermore, a close accounting of the February 1983 union elections reveals that several Guaymí-dominated electoral tables tallied overwhelmingly in favor of the supposedly all-Hispanic red slate.

Interviews with shop stewards suggest that localized voting patterns were often the product of dynamic personalities. Some local Guaymí leaders mobilized support on the farms and in the dormitories where they had influence for the independent union movement.

REPRESSION

Straightforward repression was the central nonethnic strategy employed by the transnational to dominate its labor force. In chapter 1 I documented in detail the pervasiveness of repression on the plantation whether it was direct violent repression such as the killing or imprisonment of union leaders during strikes or preventative repression such as the refusal to hire workers whose names appeared on the computerized blacklist shared by all the banana companies operating in Costa Rica (Del Monte, Castle and Cook, United Brands, and ASBANA).

Nevertheless even repression assumed an ethnic dynamic. As I have documented repeatedly, repression has historically been directed most severely against foreigners whose employment status was tenuous. The company repeatedly deported its foreign workers for union organizing or for participating in strikes. The different political space available to the various ethnic/national groups in the labor force translated into differing abilities to resist exploitation. As was shown in the case of West Indian immigrants, over long periods of time vulnerability spawned distinct political and organizational tendencies and even ideologies.

Even Guaymí hostility toward the independent union movement can be understood as a product of their vulnerability to repression rather than to their "Amerindianness" *per se*. Guaymí day laborers did not have access to alternative sources of cash income. When they were fired they were forced to return to the subsistence-level poverty of their home communities on the Reservation. Their limited social skills in non-Amerindian society prevented them (in contrast to blacks and Hispanics) from migrating to other parts of the country in search of employment. Their vulnerability was exacerbated by the blacklist the company circulated to the other major employers in Bocas del Toro Province.¹ Although all ethnic groups were subject to company repression, it hit hardest those Guaymí who had acquired cash needs. Unemployment for the plantation Guaymí, therefore, required a switch in economies and life styles back to subsistence rather than merely a change in employers.²

Some ethnic groups became targets of repression simply because of their small numbers and heightened visibility. This was the case, for example, with the Kuna. In my discussion of the Kuna, I emphasized

how the transnational had harnessed their traditional structures and how this had depoliticized them; it is also true, however, that when Kuna individuals became involved in independent union organizing the transnational was especially prompt in firing them in order to set an example to the rest of the Amerindian workforce. The Kuna leader who cooperated with the militant union movement and who supported the 1982 Sixaola strike was immediately fired and blacklisted (see chapter 11, note 18). Similarly, according to the secretary general of the red-slate labor union on the state-owned COBANA farms, two Kuna workers who offered to "persuade the rest of their people to join" were fired as soon as they began proselytizing.

FLOODING THE LABOR FORCE

I may have also overstated the ethnic factor in my descriptions of company searches for strikebreakers and of management selections of new cohorts of workers for incorporation into plantation wage work. Although the replacement of militant workers by more compliant workers assumed an ethnic dynamic on a phenomenological level (i.e., blacks were replaced by Nicaraguans and Guanacastecans in the 1920s, and Hispanics by Guaymí in the 1950s, etc.), it is not clear whether management took ethnicity *per se* into account when it decided upon whom to recruit. To a large extent, supply and demand and common sense dictated recruitment patterns. During times of labor crisis the company flooded its plantations with inexperienced peasants. Ethnicity as a defining attribute was neither irrelevant nor determinant on these occasions. For example, at the turn of the century a hungry Barbadian peasant made a better strikebreaker than a hungry Jamaican peasant when the striking workers were Jamaicans. Lines of solidarity and communication obviously form more rapidly among fellow nationals. There is a limit, however, to the importance of national/regional/ethnic solidarity. Impoverished Jamaican peasants imported directly from the countryside of Jamaica in 1910 more readily broke strikes of fellow countrymen on Central American plantations than did experienced Barbadian banana workers who had resided in Central America for several years. In other words, veteran Barbadian and Jamaican banana workers on United Fruit Company subsidiaries had more in common with one another *as workers* than did Jamaican banana workers and newly immigrated Jamaican peasants *as compatriots*. Following World War I, a company recruiting agent requested permission from the Bocas Division manager to import Jamaican peasants to replace experienced Jamaican laborers: "They are arranging another strike very soon, and I am sure

the seeing of the new Jamaicans from the country parts of Jamaica who know nothing about strikes would be of great help and control the situation" (BDA: Coombs to Kyes, April 28, 1919). Internal company correspondence from the early 1920s when labor unrest among West Indian immigrants was at a peak documents how thousands of workers were transferred from one country to another in order to saturate local labor markets, reduce wages, and undermine union movements. These massive labor transfers involved complicated shufflings of peoples of different nationalities and ethnicities. The fundamental concern, however, was not so much the ethnic/national composition of the workers involved but rather the physical presence of a mass of surplus labor power capable of undermining an incipient labor movement. Being a monopoly and a transnational, the United Fruit Company was uniquely able to manipulate international labor flows. For example, in 1921 the company's subsidiaries in Honduras and Bocas del Toro faced severe labor shortages as new lands were being opened up for banana production. Meanwhile in the Limón Division the proliferation of Panama disease had drastically reduced labor demand, whereas on the Panama Canal there existed an excess of unemployed West Indians due to massive layoffs following the World War I boom. At headquarters the vice-president in charge of tropical divisions decided how to juggle these uneven labor supplies: "I think it would be worth while for you and Blair [Bocas Division manager] to make a drive at filling up your countries with men. I realize they have union ideas, nevertheless a small surplus might be worth while" (BDA: Cutter to Chittenden, Oct. 1921). "Note that the Canal Zone Government is figuring on repatriating some 10,000 Jamaicans. . . . It is possible that you could fill up your labor supply by taking some of them to Limón and Bocas in suitable batches and turning them loose" (BDA: Cutter to Chittenden and Blair, March 1, 1922).

Company officials carefully calculated the number of laborers needed to lower wages: "We have enough farm men to carry on the work, but we lack the little surplus necessary to make further reductions in wages" (BDA: Blair to Cutter, Nov. 19, 1921). The graphic vocabulary used by the company officials illustrates the intensity of the class confrontation: "My first idea would be to *choke this country up* and shift [the surplus] to Honduras" (BDA: Chittenden to Blair, April 8, 1922, emphasis added). In this particular case, because Honduras prohibited the importation of black labor, the company was obliged to transfer blacks from the Canal Zone into the Bocas and Limón divisions and then to take Hispanics out of Bocas and Limón and send them to Honduras:¹ "My idea would be to load this country [Costa Rica] with Jamaicans [from the Canal Zone] and gradually shift the Nicaraguans and the good

Costa Ricans to Honduras. I am entirely aware that negroes are not admitted to Honduras" (BDA: Chittenden to Cutter, May 3, 1922).

These citations suggest that previous employment experience rather than the ethnicity of any given population group was the more crucial factor in management's recruitment decisions when faced with problematic labor markets.⁴ As noted in the discussion of labor quality in chapters 5 and 13, the "worst" workers in Bocas have consistently been individuals previously employed in the Panama Canal or with experience in the United States where conditions were considerably superior. Even among the "best" workers (such as the Guaymí today) there were widely divergent levels of exploitability depending upon a particular cohort's previous employment trajectory. For example, as noted in the discussion of Guaymí political orientation in chapter 10, there was a distinct dichotomy between those Guaymí who were veteran banana workers or who had been raised on the plantation versus those who were recent immigrants from the countryside, or also between Coastal Guaymí and those from the headwaters of the Cricamola River.

The transnational's most consistent policy with respect to previous employment experience and regional/national/ethnic origin was to refuse employment to workers from regions that had banana plantations. The one time the company hired experienced laborers, importing Hondurans to Bocas during the World War II employment crisis precipitated by the abacá boom, management paid dearly with a series of strikes and large-scale deportations. Despite their severe poverty Hondurans had a low tolerance for exploitation because their previous experience on the company's subsidiaries provided them with a vantage point to judge working conditions and wages.

The actions of the Honduran immigrants during World War II or the explanation for the poor work habits of black and Hispanic Chiricanos were popularly expressed in strictly ethnic (usually racist) terms. Significantly, however, company officials occasionally explained to me in specifically nonethnic terms the relationship between a worker's exploitability and his or her previous experience in the class struggle. When I asked the Bocas manager how he had chosen the regions from which to recruit strikebreakers during the 1982 Sixaola District strike he answered, "Hell! We didn't care, just so long as they came from far away. We sent our buses to where they knew nothing about bananas."

CROSS-ETHNIC PATTERNS

The relative exploitability of all the ethnic groups has changed and resulted in distinct patterns of ethnic succession in the occupational hier-

archy since the turn of the century. From management's perspective, the Guaymí workers at the time of my fieldwork were equivalent to the Nicaraguan laborers of the 1930s who, in turn, were equivalent to the West Indians at the turn of the century. It is not ethnicity per se that has determined the procession of these ethnic groups up the local class/ethnic occupational hierarchy; rather, it is the changing correlations of forces (economic and ideological) among the various groups. Of course, on a phenomenological level this conflictive social process is understood as ethnicity.

The three ethnic groups—blacks, Hispanics, and Guaymí—have engaged in similar patterns of behavior during specific historical periods depending upon which rung they occupied in the occupational/ethnic hierarchy. Each one of the ethnic groups has reacted in comparable ways to similar forms of oppression. They have all passed through explosive phases of conjugated oppression when they were exploited both economically and ideologically. When black workers in the 1910s and 1920s were subjected to a conjugation of racism and class exploitation they responded by massively affiliating with the Marcus Garvey movement. Similarly in the early 1960s the Guaymí reaction to the same form of oppression was the explosive 1960 strike and their mass conversion to the Mamachí religious movement. Hispanics, on the other hand, even when they were at the bottom of the local class hierarchy in the 1930s and 1940s were never submitted to as intense a level of ethnic discrimination as were the blacks and Guaymí since Hispanics are the dominant national ethnic group. They never massively exploded as victims of conjugated oppression; nevertheless, the wanton violence and massive alcoholism of Nicaraguans and Hondurans during the 1930s through World War II—and to a certain extent among Guanacastecans during my fieldwork—may best be understood as a manifestation of a conjugated class/ideological domination.

A more easily identifiable pattern that illustrates the limits of ethnicity in structuring behavior is the universal response to the alternative of becoming a small farmer when offered land and access to a market. Historically all the immigrant groups have left day labor employment in favor of independent farming when presented with the option. Although blacks expressed their distaste for plantation wage work most vehemently because of the exploitation of their ancestors as slaves on colonial plantations, all the ethnic groups, when questioned, offered similar reasons for their preference for farming to agricultural day labor: "I like to be my own boss. No one hassles me. I work when I want to. I'm more secure."

Another cross-cultural commonality is the generational component

to work experience and political orientation. In general, older workers regardless of their ethnicity tended to be more supportive of the militant union movement than were young workers new to the labor force. Management's exploitative practices guaranteed that most experienced workers would become more aware of their economic and class interests with time. Of course demographic considerations altered this dynamic; that is, workers with families, irrespective of ethnicity, were less willing to take risks and to involve themselves in strike movements than were single men and women. Another exception was workers approaching retirement age who feared losing their jobs. In fact, a disproportionate number of the company informants in the "ears in the ground program" (described in chapter 1) were older workers striving to curry favor to prevent themselves from being laid off.

CONSERVATIVE BLACKS: IDEOLOGY OR HISTORICAL-STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINTS?

On a theoretical level, cross-ethnic constants in attitude and behavior heighten the tension between ethnic (ideological) versus class (material) explanations for political mobilization. An analysis of the black experience in Bocas del Toro is illustrative.

Blacks have spanned the longest historical period of any ethnic group on the plantation and have undergone the most dramatic economic and ideological transformations. In chapters 6 and 7 I documented the historical and structural basis for the conservative shift in black ideology. Blacks have been vulnerable to repression and racism due to their phenotypical difference from the local population and due to their long ambiguous status as third-country nationals in Panama and Costa Rica. This historical dynamic introduces theoretical tension: if ethnicity and class are supposed to be related, which half of the relationship should one emphasize—the ideological or the material? In other words should one explain the pervasiveness of promanagement, pro-U.S. black political orientations since the mid-1930s as an ethnic/ideological phenomenon or as the specific historical-structural product of racism, ambiguous nationality, vulnerability to repression, upward mobility.

Most plantation residents subscribed wholly to an ethnic, if not racist, explanation for why blacks have been reluctant to involve themselves in the independent union movement or to support the Communist party. Perhaps more important, the most adamant proponents of a racist interpretation for black political orientations were the local black inhabitants themselves. They dismissed radical politics as some-

thing fit only for "Latins of a lower cultural level." As was demonstrated in chapter 7, this racist explanation was an important element in their ability to maintain their fragile upward mobility in the plantation occupational hierarchy. It was a way of reassuring management that they were dependable, responsible, and worthy of privileged employment opportunities.

In the company letter I cited in chapter 5 documenting Hispanic/black antagonism during a 1942 work stoppage in the abacá fields, the black workers, who were reluctant to participate in the Hispanic-initiated strike, were perhaps negotiating with management a preferential status in the local labor market by proving their loyalty during a moment of crisis. Furthermore, during World War II workers of West Indian descent were more vulnerable than Hispanics to repression due to a wave of antiblack hostility at the national level throughout both Costa Rica and Panama.

Other aspects of black political activity can also be explained in this manner without specific reference to ethnicity or to ideology. For example, during the 1934 strike in the company's Limón Division, historians have noted that the strike was weakest in the Estrella District (and nonexistent in the Sixaola District) where the concentration of black workers was highest (cf. Koch 1975:273). Rather than pointing out that the Estrella District had the highest percentage of blacks, one could emphasize that it had the highest percentage of semiproletarianized workers (i.e., part-time workers who cultivated their own private plots on the side). Semiproletarian banana workers, regardless of their ethnicity, were more difficult to organize and also more likely to offer themselves as strikebreakers. Consequently, in 1934 in the Estrella Valley the company was able to recruit strikebreakers locally since many part-time workers in the immediate vicinity were in desperate need of cash to finance their insolvent private farms. Of course, it was not a coincidence that most of these semiproletarian strikebreakers were black at this time; it was part of the historical process of their immigration and upward mobility in the context of ethnic discrimination (see chapter 6). At the time of my fieldwork local residents spoke about this historically generated black ideology in strictly ethnic or idealist terms. Anticommunism, pro-North America sentiment, and wariness of unions have become cultural markers of black ethnicity. Conservatism has emerged as a definite ethnic/ideological force among black Costa Ricans and Bocatorans, transcending material interests.

The internal divisions within the West Indian labor force offers additional evidence calling into question the either/or (but supposedly dialectical) relationship between material reality and ideology. Should the

national, regional, and even local community divisions of black plantation workers be treated as expressions of ethnic differentiation, or should they be analyzed strictly in objective economic terms? For example, should the exploitability of Martinican workers versus that of Trinidadians or Jamaicans be presented in terms of ethnicity or as the result of objective economic differences or historical experiences in the local class struggle in their natal islands? In my discussion of the dock workers in Almirante during the 1930s in chapter 5 I noted that the company was able to benefit from the community-based divisions of a Balkanized workforce. Closer examination of these divisions, however, reveals objective differences in the class interests of these dock workers. Some were semiproletarians, whereas others were full-time wagedworkers.

ETHNICITY VERSUS CLASS FRACTIONS

Ethnic constituencies in union elections provide an even more accessible example of the conceptual tension in an approach which opposes ethnicity to material constraints. In the February 1983 elections the blacks and the Guaymí voted overwhelmingly promanagement for the white slate whereas the Chiricanos and the other Hispanics voted primarily for the independent red slate. Union leaders attributed black support for the white slate to the presence of five blacks in positions of leadership on the white slate compared to only two on the red slate.⁵ A black dockworker, however, explained to me that he had voted for the white slate not because there were five blacks on it but because it had more dock workers (who happened to be black) in its leadership. His primary concern was that there be individuals in positions of power within the union leadership who were familiar with the problems of dock workers. In other words, the local occupational hierarchy on the plantation and the subdivision of the labor force into class fractions rather than solely ethnic affiliation may have determined voting patterns.

Following an identical train of logic as the black worker cited above, a Guaymí harvester before the union elections told me that it was imperative to keep Hispanics out of positions of power on the new union slate because no Hispanics worked on the harvesting crews. He claimed that Hispanic union leaders did not "watch out for the interests" of harvesters since none of "their own kind" was involved. Another black worker in the Materials and Supplies Department told me that he had voted for the white slate despite the fact that he realized it was subservient to management because he had heard a warning on the radio (in

Creole English) that the company intended to withdraw from Bocas del Toro Province should the red slate win the union elections. As a stable worker rooted for several generations in Bocas and employed in a privileged position within the local labor hierarchy, he was more susceptible to the company's threat to withdraw from the region. In contrast, the typical Chiricano Hispanic immigrant day laborer who tended to be younger and single did not have a long-term attachment to the province.

IDEOLOGY AND CLASS STRUGGLE

The conceptual tension between ideology and material reality inherent in most class-oriented political economy approaches leads to a theoretical dead end because it frames the definition of ethnicity in terms of a relationship between class and ethnicity. Although there might be something universal about ethnicity (in a Lévi-Strauss sense; i.e., as a "we" versus "they" boundary marker), that is not a concern here. Ethnicity's definition and significance are rooted in inequality and conflict within the labor process. Predetermined primordial traits are merely incidental, perhaps even random.

The capitalist work process picks up divisions in the cultural realm and redefines them into ideology. The capitalist division of labor lends itself to ethnic differentiation and antagonism. Almost anything can serve to exclude people from power. Ethnicity is only one among many vehicles for organizing power relations. There is an inherent tendency for management to break down the productive process into its smallest components so that the precise quantities of differentially priced laborers can be hierarchically assigned to distinct tasks. This has been called the "Babbage principle" in reference to the nineteenth-century British inventor who first illustrated the advantage to management of an assembly-line production strategy. In a theoretical treatise, Charles Babbage demonstrated how pins could be manufactured more cheaply by subdividing the tasks according to skill and then hiring different kinds of laborers for each task (1963: 175–76, cited in Braverman 1974: 80–81). In Babbage's nineteenth-century example, the remuneration to the differentially skilled labor force of pin makers was subdivided by age and sex (man, woman, boy, girl). On the Bocas del Toro plantation the most important organizing principle on a phenomenological level for structuring the division of labor was ethnicity.

The capitalist division of labor in general, and the banana plantation social formation in particular, is a pressure cooker for generating ideology and for escalating ethnic markers into an antagonistic framework.⁶ A complicated occupational hierarchy results from the many

technical and varied tasks required to produce bananas. This logistics of production lends itself to ethnic categorization just as Babbage's nineteenth-century pin factory lent itself to a division of labor by sex and age. Furthermore, the transnational banana companies have historically offered rigorous working conditions in regions with low initial population densities; consequently, they have had to scour the world for cheap labor, purposefully importing ethnically diverse labor forces.

Each wave of ethnically distinct laborers has been integrated at different levels into the stratified occupational hierarchy of banana production, creating a *de facto* apartheid division of labor. The correlation between a worker's ethnicity and his or her position in the occupational hierarchy exacerbates ethnic discrimination. The reality of the productive process reinforces, therefore, the ideologies of ethnic superiority. The ethnic group at the bottom of the ideological hierarchy (i.e., the West Indians at the turn of the century, the Nicaraguans in the 1930s, the Guaymí following World War II) performs the least desirable and lowest-prestige tasks in the local occupational hierarchy. This can result in what I call conjugated oppression, whereby economic (class) exploitation conflates with ideological (ethnic) domination into an experience of oppression transcending the sum of the parts.

The theoretical construct of conjugated oppression obliges one to treat ethnic discrimination on a par with class exploitation. For example, a comparison of the different roles that ethnic discrimination played in the integration of the Guaymí and the Kuna into the Bocas del Toro labor force in the 1950s and 1960s reveals how crucial the ideological dimension can be in determining a given population's position within a local class/ethnic hierarchy. Although the Kuna were exploited economically because of their low position in the occupational hierarchy on the plantation, unlike the Guaymí they did not suffer from a conjugated oppression.

Stratification according to class fraction and ethnicity is not unique to the banana industry. The extreme form that it has taken in Bocas del Toro is, to a large extent, characteristic of the entire Atlantic littoral of Central America which shares a history and structure of economic production.⁷ Since the mid-nineteenth century, United States-based transnational corporations (primarily extractive industries such as logging, mining, bananas, cacao, sugar, and palm oil) have expanded into the region, generating a series of economic booms and busts. These extractive transnationals have both created ethnically diverse populations and also complicated hierarchical structures of wage labor relations. The entire region, therefore, has become an incubator for fomenting inter-ethnic tension (cf. Bourgois 1986a; Gordon 1985).

The industries introduced by North American capital on the Atlantic Coast of Central America—and especially the social formations revolving around the banana plantation—foment racism and thrive on it. However, the transnationals did not invent racism. Racism is not a manipulation of management. The dynamic through which ethnic identities develop and reproduce themselves is inherently conflictive, and fraught with struggle and inequality. Racism on the plantation in Bocas is a form of ideological domination, which has been magnified and institutionalized by the *de facto* apartheid labor hierarchy, but it also exists independent from the transnational. All the company has to do to ensure the Balkanization of its workers is to maintain their ethnic diversity; the natural process of conflict and struggle for better positions within the economic and ideological hierarchies will then take care of the rest.⁸

Nevertheless, scholars and political activists whose analytical framework is based on political economy and class tend to dismiss racism (and even sometimes ethnic identity itself) as an externally imposed manipulation by management. For example, the very ethnic identity of the black population of West Indian descent in Bocas and Limón has been treated as a product of the scheming of the United Fruit Company (cf. Olien 1977: 142; Duncan n.d.: 5; Herzfeld 1977: 105; and Joseph 1982: 49). Although the company has benefited from the cultural reaffirmation and differentiation of its West Indian immigrant workers, it would be a misinterpretation of the complexity of ethnic processes to attribute them exclusively to management's willful manipulation. Though it was perceptive on Cabarrús's part (1979: 81) to note that the transnational has encouraged folkloric expressions of Kuna culture to promote Amerindian separation from the rest of the workforce, the revitalization of Kuna institutions has also been a way for the Kuna to resist racism and economic exploitation. In other words, it has not been necessary for the transnational to foment systematically ethnic differentiation and racism. Ethnicity assumes an ideological dynamic of its own in the struggle over power and scarce resources. As I suggested above, for the most part, management has not necessarily paid attention to ethnicity when it selected its labor force during crises; it has merely been interested in finding the cheapest laborers possible no matter what their race, religion, or creed.

At the same time, of course, management has often consciously manipulated ethnic tensions (see chapters 5 and 10). Company officials in Bocas del Toro and even at United Brands headquarters in New York City indicated that management was keenly aware of the ethnic composition of the Bocas labor force. Most notably, when I asked the divi-

sion manager why his labor force had remained calm when the Armuelles Division (the company's Pacific Coast subsidiary in Panama) experienced protracted labor unrest in late 1983, he explained: "The union has become too strong in Armuelles. If the administration there was smart they'd bring in Indians and promote a division between the Latins and the Indians. Divide and conquer, you understand what I mean? [chuckle]." Significantly, management does not limit itself to ethnic divisions; any kind of divisiveness will do. The superintendent of the Sixaola District explained to me how in a confrontation with packing plant workers over piecework payments (see chapter 10), he purposefully "diverted the discussion" to ridicule the *cholos* so that the Hispanic workers would vent their frustration over their low wages on a safer subject. On another occasion he offered an almost theoretical explanation for the logic of his divide-and-conquer tactics. His analysis clearly transcends the realm of ethnic divisions per se: "Costa Ricans are a very underdeveloped people; they are very nationalistic and very particularistic. You've seen them get all excited over soccer games: Farm 96 against Farm 97 or 86 against 87. This same thing works real well against the *cholos*. You can play off one against the other. It gets them all excited. Hah!"

Even if we accept that ethnicity is only an expression of an infinite variety of ideological phenomena, we still have to explain its genesis. If we do not take refuge in a "dialectical cop out" then we have to do away with the notion of a material and an ideal relationship and collapse the two irresolvable halves of the relationship into the same material social process. In other words, there is no either/or relationship between class and ethnicity; the two are part of the same process of struggle. Ethnicity is not a characteristic or even a social relationship; it is a dynamic, ongoing, historical confrontation. For example, when one asserts that management is primarily concerned with a laborer's previous employment history one is not contradicting the central importance of ethnicity in determining hiring practices, because the ethnicity of any given worker is a product of that worker's previous employment history and participation in class struggle (e.g., the case of Hispanics from Chiriquí or Puntarenas). The same applies to the phenomenon of class fractions; ethnicity may also mean being part of a class fraction (e.g., the case of Guaymí harvesters or black stevedores and clerks). Ethnicity may also consist of being a phenotypically distinct third-generation stable immigrant with a privileged day labor position (e.g., blacks of West Indian descent), or being a landless laborer from a peasant community that lost its land base to the cattle industry (e.g., the case of Guanacastecans and Nicaraguans), or being a strikebreaker, or being

a part-time worker with a private plot on the side, which subsidizes subsistence reproduction (e.g., the case of West Indian immigrants through the 1950s), or being vulnerable to deportation and repression, or being subjected to overwhelming racism (e.g., the case of the Guaymí) because those processes shape ethnicity historically and render its experience meaningful socially. One must, therefore, transcend the tension between ethnicity and material reality by rendering it irrelevant. Ethnicity should be viewed as a process rather than as a characteristic or even a relationship.

The utility of eradicating ethnicity's dialectical relationship to class by collapsing the components of the dialectic (via the historical dynamic of class struggle) into the same material social process becomes clearer when we look specifically at the phenomenon of racism and the praxis of political confrontation. Ideology (no matter how one defines it) plays a crucial role in mobilizing or demobilizing people in the concrete practice of struggle. Racism is the most poignantly felt and easily perceived aspect of oppression confronting any given individual at the bottom of a local class/ethnic hierarchy. Regardless of what ethnicity "really is" on a theoretical level, in the day-to-day reality of the banana workers in Bocas del Toro it has provided the idiom for political mobilization. It assumes a structural dynamic historically by acting as a vehicle for reordering and reproducing power relations within the division of labor. Workers legitimate their participation in a strike or a union movement on the basis of their ethnicity, nationality, or regional identity. If the workers' movement is seriously to challenge United Brands on its Bocas del Toro plantation subsidiary it must equate ethnicity and class without subsuming one to the other. The confrontation has to focus around both economic exploitation and also ideological domination because the persistence of racism historically on the Bocas del Toro plantation has structured labor relations in as real a manner as has monopoly capital.

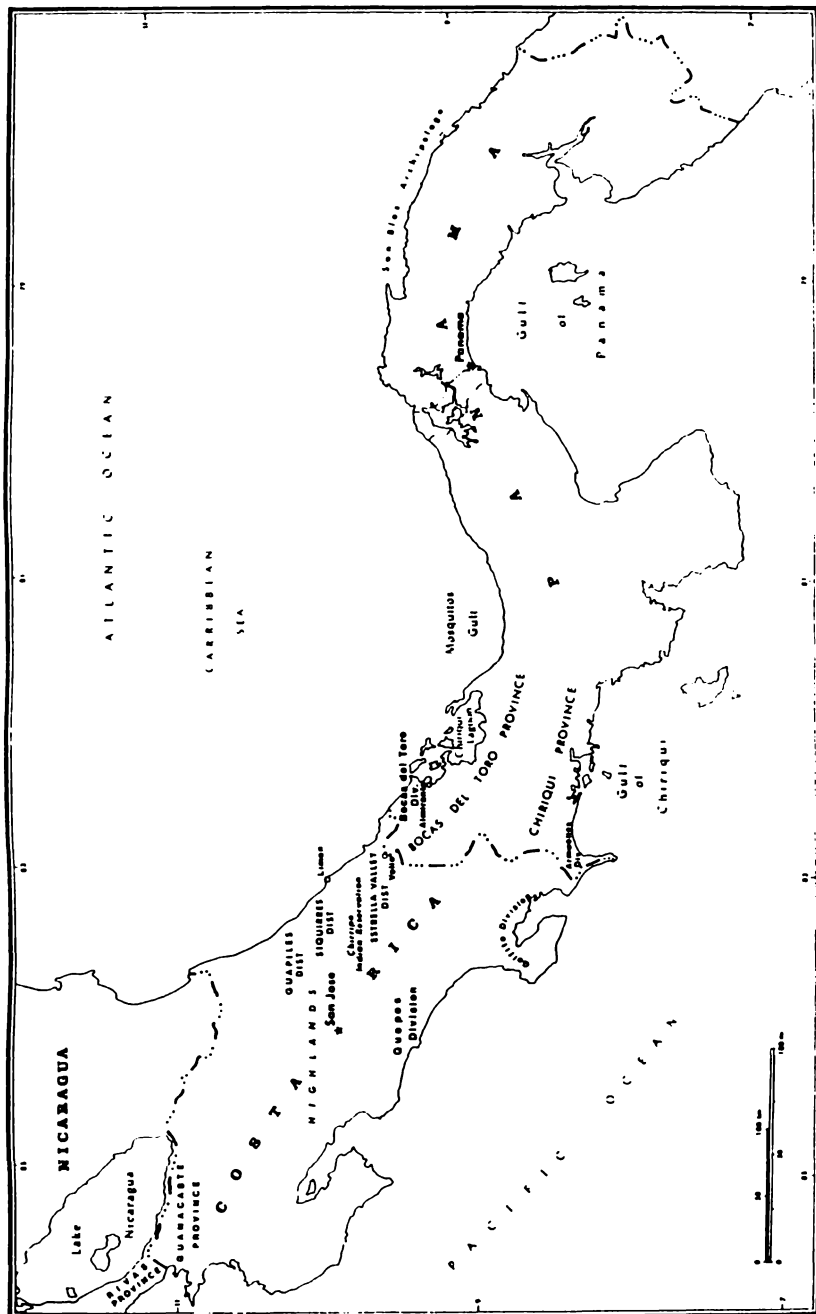
Appendix

Maps

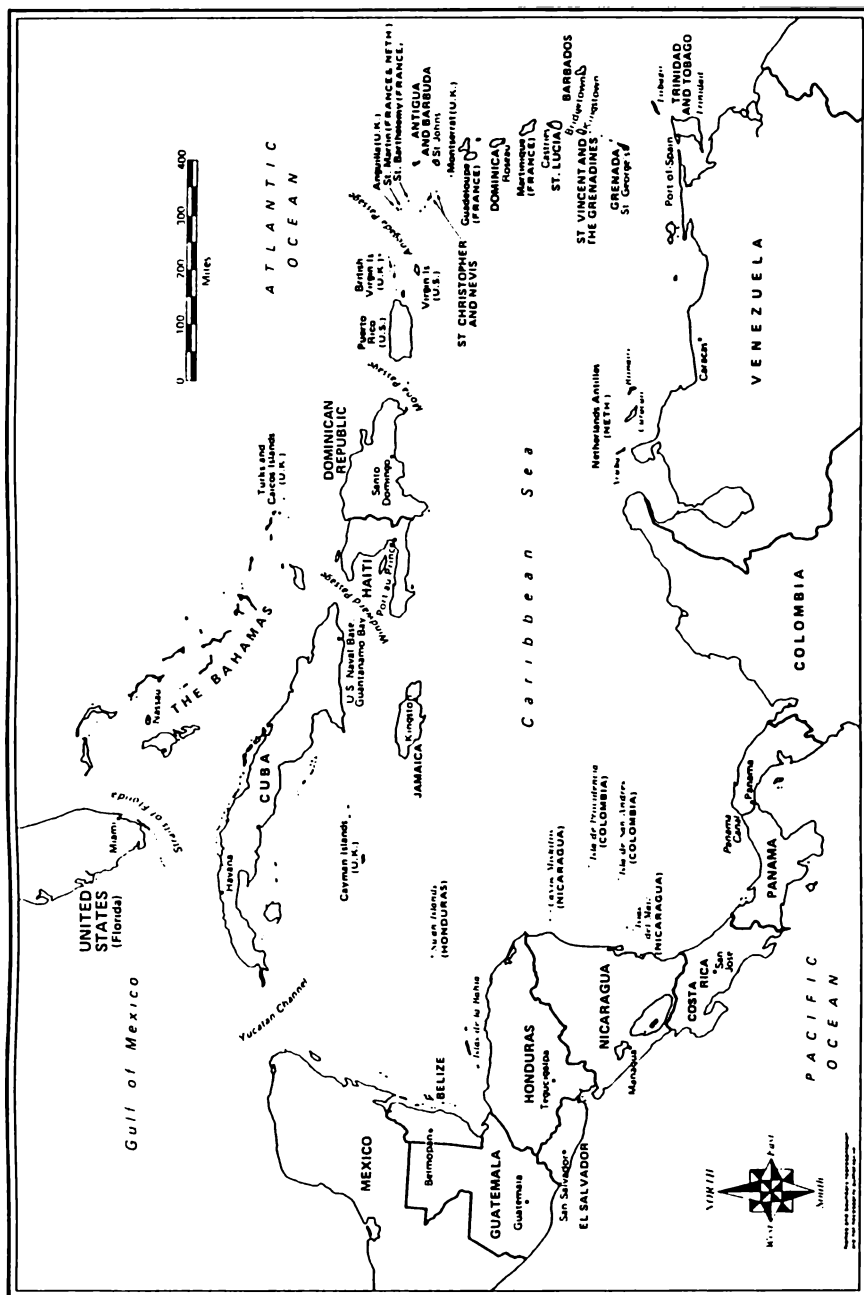
1 / Costa Rica and Panama	230
2 / Bocas del Toro Division	231
3 / Central America and the Caribbean	232

Figures

1 / Historical Summary of the Bocas del Toro Division	233
2 / Day Laborers by Origin	234
3 / Number of Laborers and Employees by Origin	235
4 / COBANA Workers by Origin	236
5 / Sixaola Laborers by Province	236
6 / Sixaola Strike Participants by Origin	237



Map 1. Costa Rica and Panama



Map 3. Central America and the Caribbean
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Historical Summary of Bocas del Toro Division

Year	Crops	Ethnicity of Labor Force	Location of Plantings	Ecological and Other Constraints
1880s-1890s	banana boom	West Indians	Almirante Bay	numerous independent producers and commercializers
1900s-1910s	banana boom	West Indians	Changuinola	Panama disease, brown sigatoka, United Fruit consolidates monopoly
1920s	banana boom, cacao introduced	West Indians (becoming small farmers), Nicaraguans, Guanacastecans, some Costa Ricans, some Bribrí	Sixatola and Talamanca (on Costa Rican side of the Division)	Panama disease, brown sigatoka
1930s	banana bust, cacao exported	West Indians (becoming small farmers), increasing numbers of Hispanics	Sixatola and Changuinola (Talamanca abandoned)	extensive disease, soil depletion, floods
1940s	abaca boom, cacao exported, no bananas	West Indians (emigrate or become small farmers), Hondurans, Nicaraguans, Chiricanos, Guanacastecans	Changuinola and Sixatola	extensive disease, World War II
1950s	bananas reintroduced, cacao in decline	Kuna, Guaymí, various Hispanic groups, fewer West Indians	Changuinola Sixatola (cacao only)	extensive disease, flood following banana fields unsuccessful
1960s	cacao terminated, banana boom (new varieties)	Guaymí, few West Indians, various Hispanic groups	Changuinola (new varieties with packing plants)	major strike, new varieties of bananas more stable but require intensified fertilizer and pesticide control
1970s-1984	banana boom (new varieties)	Guaymí, few West Indians, various Hispanic groups	Changuinola, Las Tablas, Sixatola	sigatoka disease controlled with aerial pesticide spraying of new varieties

Figure 1.

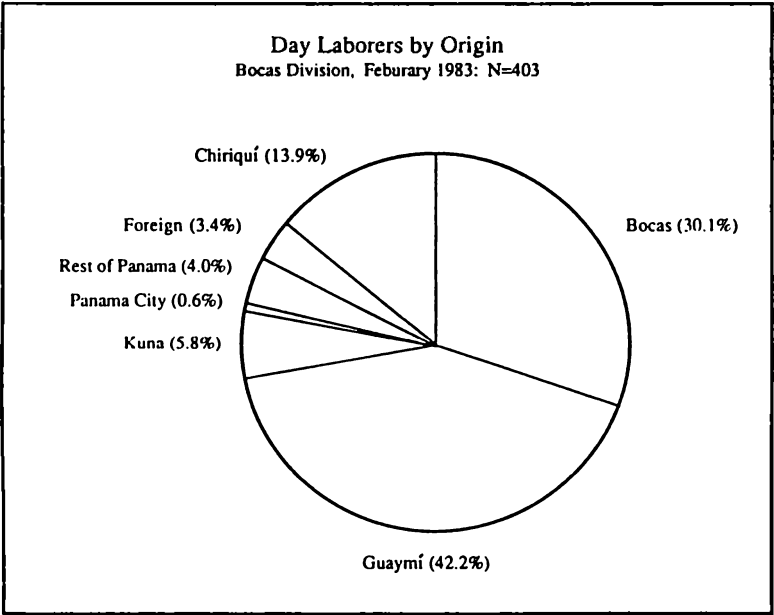


Figure 2.

Number of Laborers and Employees by Origin

Bocas Division, February 1983

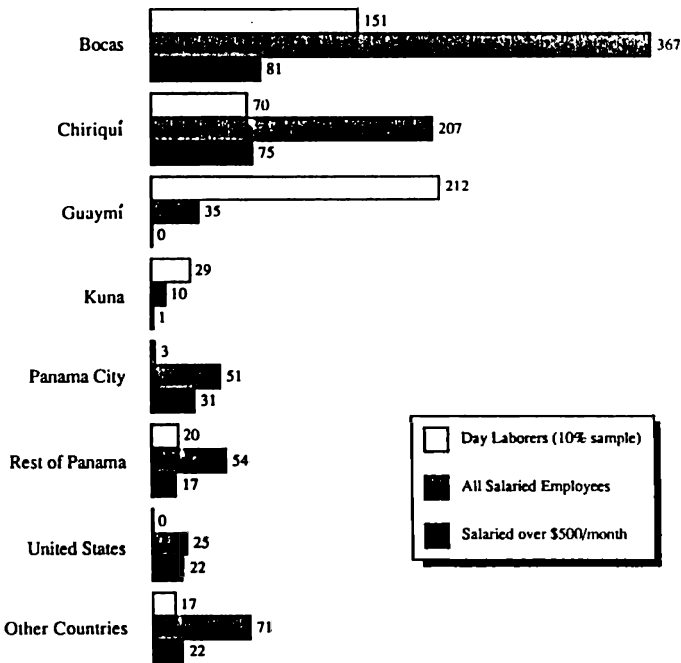


Figure 3.

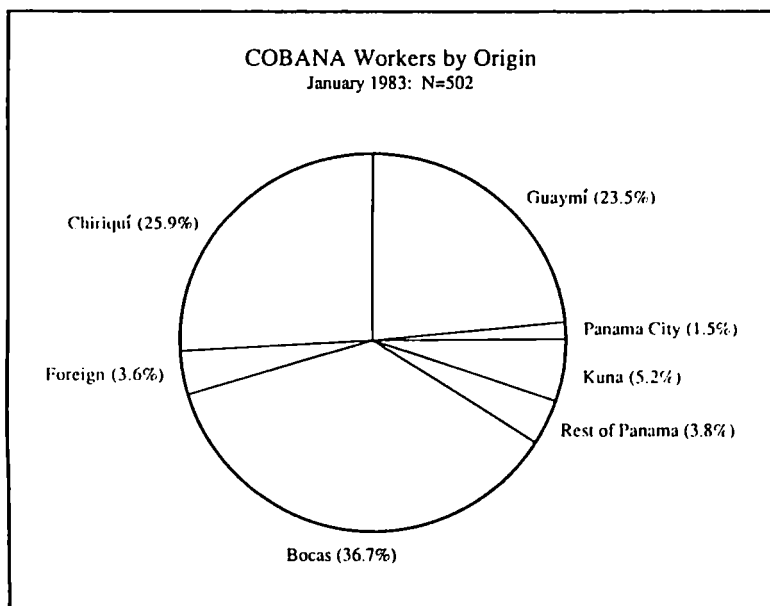


Figure 4.

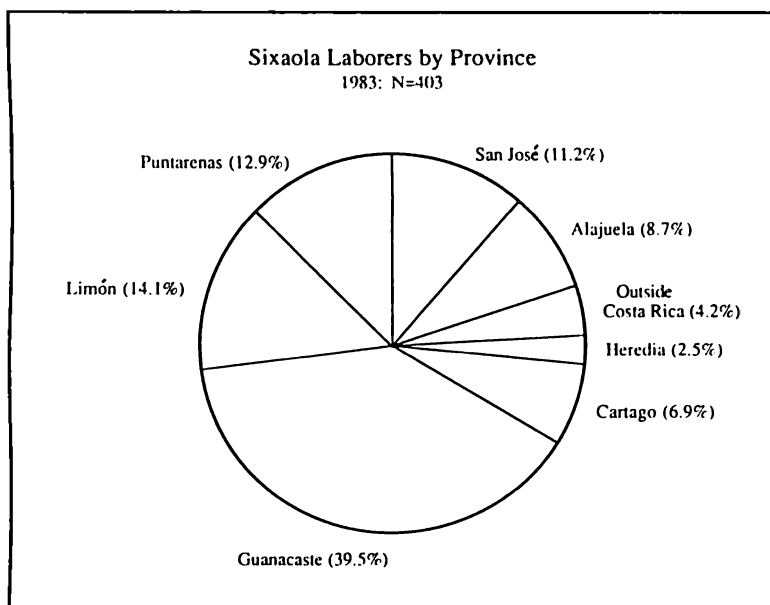


Figure 5.

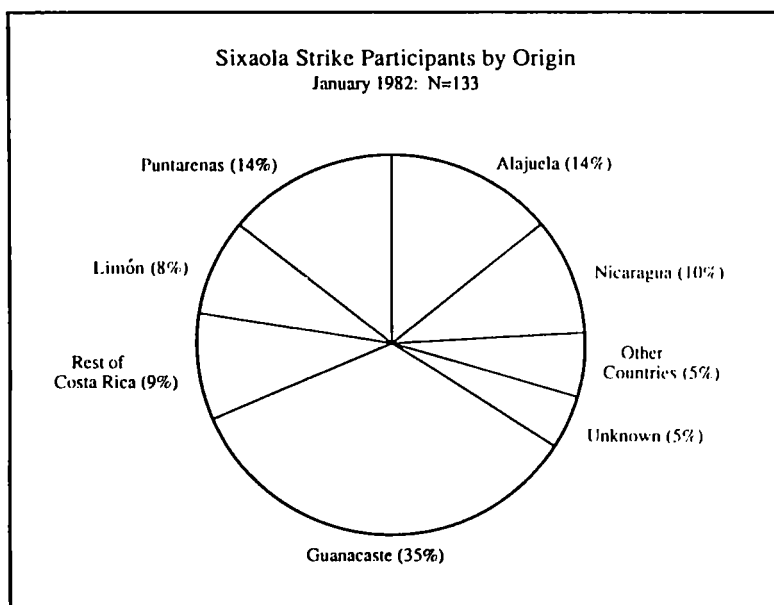


Figure 6.

Notes

PREFACE

1. The United Fruit Company's name was changed to United Brands following a merger in 1971.

2. In Panama and Costa Rica *cholo* is a derogatory term for an unassimilated Amerindian.

3. Sexism offers another good example of ideological domination. Like ethnic discrimination, sexism interacts with and assumes much of its importance and meaning in the context of class exploitation (cf. Stoler 1985; Bossen 1984; Enloe 1985; Fernandez-Kelly 1983; Nash and Fernandez-Kelly 1983; Nash and Safa 1979).

4. The Bocas del Toro Division is also sometimes referred to as the Changuinola Division. In the United Fruit Company's historical archives it is alternately called the Panama Division and the Almirante Division. For clarity's sake, I will use exclusively the names Bocas del Toro Division or Bocas Division to refer to my fieldwork site.

5. The first number on the identity cards all Panamanian and Costa Rican citizens are obliged to carry indicates province of birth. Panamanian identity cards even specify whether or not an individual was born on an Indian Reservation. The transnational's labor roster lists every worker's job title and identity card number.

CHAPTER ONE. THE LOGISTICS OF PRODUCTION

1. The Chiriqui Land Company was first formally registered in the State of Delaware in 1927.

2. Updated statistics on Bocas del Toro banana production were provided by the documentation center of the Union of Banana Exporting Nations [UPEB] and the National Banana Association [ASBANA] of Costa Rica.

3. PAIS stands for Agroindustrial Producers of Sixaola (Costa Rica). CO-BANA is the acronym for the National Banana Corporation (Panama). PAIS deserves special mention as an example of the United Fruit Company's ability to channel nationalist sentiment into a profitable enterprise. United Fruit Company officials founded this "national corporation" as a joint venture with the Costa Rican government when president Daniel Oduber threatened to expropriate over 8,000 hectares of uncultivated territory in the Sixaola District. In return for "donating" the land to the government, the company received 40 percent of the shares of PAIS. As a national agricultural corporation, the new corporation qualified for subsidized capital from international financial institutions that promote agricultural development projects. According to a long-term contract, all the bananas produced by PAIS had to be sold to the United Fruit Company for subsequent commercialization. In this manner, the transnational was guaranteed a steady supply of bananas without having had to provide the initial capital investment. Furthermore, since PAIS is a national company, it could use more repressive tactics in evicting the hundreds of small farmers who had invaded the uncultivated portions of its territory.

The company has shown considerable sophistication in recent years in its ability to accommodate the nationalist sentiments of its host countries. For example the president of United Brands testified in the U.S. Congress in favor of President Carter's Panama Canal Treaty in 1978. The transnational's Public Affairs Department distributed a pamphlet version of this testimony as evidence of the company's "new attitude" toward Third World governments (Milstein 1978). See Nuñez (1976) for a description of this new strategy in Central America, and Trouillot (1988:chap. 7) for a discussion of how Geest, a London-based banana-exporting transnational active in the Caribbean has abandoned production and has successfully transferred the costs and risks of cultivation to the peasantry in Dominica.

4. The transnational promotes sports, specifically soccer, in order to deflect workers' attention away from their working and living conditions. For example, the head of the Labor Relations Department for the Sixaola District requested additional funds to promote sports events on the grounds that "sports helps distract the worker so that he is not thinking of other issues which later on could cause problems for the company" (SDF: Weekly Labor Relations Report, Nov. 5-11, 1983).

5. On an average day, a typical packing plant can produce between 2,500 and 4,000 boxes of bananas each weighing 40 pounds. In 1987 the four packing

plants on the Costa Rican side of the division (the Sixaola District) produced 3,186,159 boxes (statistics provided by UPEB and ASBANA).

6. In Nicaragua since the Sandinista revolution, women have begun working in the fields but everywhere else in Central America fieldwork is reserved for males.

7. The bagger covers the immature stems of bananas with a plastic bag impregnated with pesticide to prevent insects from eating the bananas as they grow. The guy line securer holds up the banana plants with rope to prevent the weight of the banana stem from dragging down the entire plant in case of heavy wind or rain.

8. The first devastating disease to hit the export banana industry was a root and stalk fungus that originated in Bocas del Toro in 1903; hence its name the "Panama disease" (*fusarium cubense*). Today the most problematic disease faced by the industry is black sigatoka (*cercospora musae*), a leaf fungus that can only be controlled by expensive aerial spraying.

9. The most spectacular case of infrastructure destruction by the United Fruit Company was its abandonment of the Tela Division in Honduras. In 1930, 125 kilometers of railroad track were ripped up and hundreds of bridges were torn apart (LaBarge 1959: 28-29). Much of the railroad track was simply thrown into the ocean and the wooden supports of the bridges were left to rot by the side of the rivers where they had been dismantled.

10. Ironically these superficial skin bruises and scars do not usually affect the fruit inside the peel; nonetheless, shoppers in Europe and North America refuse to purchase blemished bananas and are prepared to pay more for those with a clean exterior.

11. Piecework payment causes workers to raise voluntarily their level of exploitation since their pay is a function of how much they produce. This process results in premature aging and rapid health deterioration among long-term banana workers (see Bolaños 1979; Chediak 1980). Indeed, even young laborers frequently comment that their heavy exertions are aging them. I was told that two years working as a backer carrying banana stems on the harvesting crew "uses you up" as much as four years of "normal life."

12. Indeed, banana production is one of the most labor-intensive corporately produced agricultural export crops in the world. For example, the land-to-laborer ratio in the Sixaola District was 1.12 hectares for each worker during my fieldwork (SDF: Loose statistical documents). By comparison the land-to-labor ratio in cattle production oscillates between 40 and 60 hectares for each worker.

13. The following description of a strike in the 1970s on a Colombian banana plantation by a retired company official illustrates well the explosive nature of management-labor relations: "They [the strikers] besieged the houses. They would shout offenses and scream at us and cry—terrible things they did. They took over the fancy houses of the company. The manager was an American. They tied him down and the women urinated on him. They did all kinds of terrible things to him; they did not let him speak in English. At the end the

army sent over 500 soldiers. The superintendent escaped; but he got lost in the jungle for three days and later went crazy."

14. In the late 1950s, the United States government pressured the transnational to recognize ORIT-affiliated unions. In 1958, United Fruit Company headquarters issued a circular to "ALL TROPICAL DIVISION MANAGERS: I had a long conference with . . . high officials in the State Department. The State Department representatives were obviously disturbed by the bad relations between ORIT and the United Fruit Company and stated that they considered the free labor movement, as well as American business itself, to be essential arms in the fight against communism" (BDA: Bump to all managers, Dec. 12, 1958).

A report from the Bocas division manager to headquarters reveals that management founded a union in the early 1950s in order to keep the labor movement under its control: "The Workers' Union [was] organized under the auspices of Mr. Myrick [the division manager]. Vargas was . . . actually employed to head up the labor union in this division, and at the meeting held a couple of weeks ago, he was elected president of the union. His work has been entirely satisfactory to date" (BDA: Munch to Moore, June 24, 1953).

15. For a detailed discussion of CIA involvement in AIFLD and ORIT, see Agee (1975).

16. The white union slate has a history of favoring compromise with management and of avoiding strikes. White union leaders are staunchly anticommunist. The red slate, on the other hand, pursues a militant, confrontational approach to management-labor relations, along both economic and political lines. In contrast to the whites, the reds adopt resolutions in solidarity with national liberation movements and in favor of human rights in Central America. They tend to make anticapitalist, rather than anticommunist, declarations. Some of the red slate's leadership are also members of the Panamanian Communist party (*Partido del Pueblo*); consequently both management and the pro-management union leadership refer to the red slate as "communist." The red union members themselves differentiate their movement from the promanagement one by calling themselves "class conscious" (*classista*). Because the terminology "class conscious" is ambiguous and politically charged, for the sake of neutrality and simplicity, I will refer to the WCTU-affiliated tendency (the reds) as the "militant."

17. The most dramatic case of violent repression was the 1928 Colombia banana strike. The estimates for the number of workers killed by Colombian government troops on that occasion oscillate between 40 and 1,500 (Kepner and Soothill 1935: 328-29). During my fieldwork several workers were killed and wounded by security forces during strikes on neighboring banana plantations in Costa Rica. For example, during a two-month strike on Del Monte's plantations in 1982, Costa Rican security forces escorted strikebreakers into the fields. They shot into crowds of protesting workers on several occasions, seriously wounding several individuals (*La Nación*, Sept. 22, 1982: 6). Dozens of strikers were imprisoned and several were seriously beaten while in the custody of the security forces (personal communications of victims). For a selection of newspaper articles on the sixty-six-day strike see *La Nación*, Sept. 22: 6, 26: 6, 29: 6,

Nov. 2:6, 20:4, 21:4, 1982; *La Libertad*, Oct. 1–7:1, 1982; *La Universidad*, Oct. 1–7:18, 15–21, 1982. Similarly, during a seventy-two-day strike in 1984 on the United Fruit Company's Golfito Division, security forces killed two workers and wounded and jailed several others. I personally witnessed the company's provision of transport to the security forces during this strike. (For selected press reports see Pacifica Radio news broadcasts, July 18 and 23, 1984; *La República*, July 25, 1984:3; *El Debate*, July 17, 1984; *La Nación Internacional*, Sept. 27–Oct. 3, 1984:4.)

18. The Standard Fruit Company (owned by Castle and Cooke) was the first to initiate this computerized blacklist in Costa Rica. All three multinationals, as well as the government corporation in charge of regulating the banana industry (ASBANA) pooled their data on labor union organizers.

19. The determined, conspiratorial tone of the managers' reports to headquarters on union activity portray well the polarized nature of management-labor relations: "I have the reds totally controlled. They have not been able to make any advances despite the frequent clandestine visits of communist leaders from San José and Limón" (SDF: Araya to Lohrengel, Aug. 18, 1982). "I am maintaining myself alert and am intensifying the vigilance because of the red union's insistence in trying to penetrate this zone" (*ibid.*, Oct. 6, 1982).

CHAPTER TWO. MONOPOLY POWER

1. For primarily apologist accounts of the early years of United Fruit Company expansion see Adams 1914; Crowther 1929; Reynolds 1927. For a well-documented critique of company operations see Kepner and Soothill 1935 and Kepner 1936. Although dated, these last two books still provide some of the best insights into how the United Fruit Company operates.

2. The government of Costa Rica gave the company vast extensions of land free of charge. For example, through the Soto-Keith contract of 1884, Minor Keith was granted 800,000 acres of land (8 percent of the arable land of the entire country) in return for financing the termination of the Atlantic railroad.

3. The text is as follows:

Attorney José Astua Aguilar for himself and in the name of his children [list of five names], his wife . . . and Rodolfo Rojas Montero, for himself and in the name of his daughters [list of names] presented themselves . . . before the judge . . . claiming for each one of the twelve persons indicated 500 hectares of government land situated in the district of Limón and bounded as follows: . . .

Mr. Anderson continues stating that all of the rights which the parties mentioned herein have in the two denouncements specified [have] been deeded to him . . . as cessionaire he cedes in turn all of his rights, actions and privileges which he has or may have in the before mentioned denouncements . . . to the United Fruit Company of Jersey City in the sum of five

thousand colones which in this act and in my presence he receives in current money. (Protocol #7, cited in Palmer 1907: 185–86)

4. The dilemma of technological transformations in the ecology of banana production has, once again, become a problem for the transnational in its search for a variety of banana resistant to black sigatoka. Apparently a debate is currently taking place within management over the advisability of promoting research for a sigatoka-resistant variety of banana. The cost of biweekly aerial fumigation against sigatoka is one of the greatest barriers to entry to competitors. A United Fruit Company agronomist explained to me: “United Brands has to calculate: do they make more money by finding a sigatoka-resistant banana plant or by not finding one? The way it is now, you have to have the capital for the aerial spraying, or you have to sign a contract with a buyer who will spray for you. When a resistant plant is found, then any old Joe Blow will be able to grow export-quality bananas.”

5. The Standard Fruit Company began operations in the 1920s but was much smaller than the United Fruit Company until the late 1960s. Del Monte entered the banana industry when the United Fruit Company lost its U.S. Supreme Court antitrust case in the late 1950s and was obliged to sell its Guatemala Division to Del Monte.

6. A Honduras-based company official told me, “It is much easier to deal with military governments.”

7. Honduras is probably the most classic example of a “banana republic.” For example, in 1911, the Cuyamel Company (later to become a subsidiary of the United Fruit Company) successfully sponsored a naval invasion of the country by an exiled local *caudillo*, Manuel Bonilla. As soon as Bonilla seized the presidency, he granted the Cuyamel Company generous land leases and tax holidays (Volk 1981: 4).

8. The United States secretary of state (John Dulles) and the director of the CIA (Allen Dulles) at the time of the overthrow of the Arbenz government were former United Fruit Company attorneys. The assistant secretary of state for Inter-American Affairs (John Moore Cabot) was the brother of the president of the United Fruit Company (Thomas Cabot) (Schlesinger and Kinzer 1983: 82–83, 106).

Since the ouster of Arbenz, the company has continued to be active in covert action politics. For example, it supplied two freighters for the Bay of Pigs invasion against Cuba in 1961 (McCann 1976: 212). The destabilization of unsympathetic governments is by no means limited to the United Fruit Company. For example, in December 1983, Castle and Cooke (the Standard Fruit Company) pulled out of Nicaragua literally overnight. According to a Standard Fruit Company official, “We wanted to make an example of the Sandinistas. We wanted them to fall flat on their faces.”

9. An official stationed on the company’s Honduran subsidiary told me: “Of course we pay bribes here. It’s no secret. Everything works with bribes and deals in this country. We can buy—and sell—anyone we want here. We can

even buy the communists. Everything is corrupt here. You have to work that way.”

10. The company’s agent in Panama City was on a first-name basis with the president who would address amicable letters to him:

“Dear Friend, I [the president of Panama] received the copy of the project for increasing taxes. It will remain definitively the way we decided upon it the day before yesterday. I have already made several copies to give to a few friendly senators for them to introduce it when the second debate is taking place in order for the modifications suggested by you and accepted by me be established. I am your close friend and faithful servant” (BDA: Porras to McFarland, Dec. 17, 1918).

11. When diplomacy failed, the company always had a last resort: “If it becomes necessary I think we could probably take this matter up with the State Department at Washington and they would compel some settlement of the question” (BDA: Kyes to McFarland, April 6, 1919). “In view of the role the United States has played in mediating . . . [I] believe [the] Department [of State] should know of present attitude which may culminate in our interests being seriously prejudiced” (BDA: Kyes to Chittenden, Feb 16, 1918; see also Seligson 1980:58).

Conversely, the transnational has also “done favors” for the U.S. government. For example, in the 1970s when the company was considering withdrawing from direct production in Honduras and limiting itself to commercializing bananas, the State Department (according to a company official based in Honduras) requested that the transnational not diminish its presence in Honduras “in order to maintain U.S. influence and stability.” Similarly, Seymour Milstein, the president and chief executive officer of United Brands, has been a member of President Reagan’s Economic Commission on the Caribbean Basin. According to a high-level company official, following President Edward Seaga’s election in Jamaica, Milstein arranged for the United Fruit Company to provide technical assistance to a banana renovation project in that country even though his technical advisers considered it unprofitable. When I asked him why Milstein was willing to do so he responded, “He’s just a dirty Jew trying to get in good with the president. He wants to become a member of WASP [White Anglo-Saxon Protestant] clubs.”

12. The extent of United Brands’ product diversity was brought home to me as I began writing this book in New York City and realized that not only had the transnational provided me with a subject, but it had also produced my lunch (John Morrell frankfurters) and the printer attached to my word processor (a TRT).

13. The abacá plant [*musa textilis*] resembles the banana plant. Although it is sometimes called “Manila hemp,” it is not related to true hemp or to henequen. Its buoyancy makes it especially useful for ships’ hawsers and cables.

14. I attempted to collect the statistics on the size of the labor force and the extensions of land planted in bananas, cacao, and abacá over time in order to present them as a graph. Unfortunately these statistics were highly inaccurate

and contradictory. In its various publications, the company provides dramatically inconsistent figures for the same year.

15. The company agent in Panama City in 1918 complained to the president that the banana tax in Colombia was one-fourth that of Panama (BDA: McFarland to Kyes, Oct. 26, 1918), and also stressed the "absence of profits, high labor [costs] in comparison with other countries and bad quality [of bananas] raised in Bocas" (BDA: McFarland to Kyes, Dec. 18 1918)."

16. On another occasion the company agent reported: "The President [of Panama] this afternoon called my attention to the \$/40 per share dividend on United Fruit Company stock. . . . I assured him that this was all sugar and freight profits and explained in a lot of details mostly made up at the moment, how much sugar lands we had planted and the profit thereon, that we had paid no extra dividends for several years . . . but we had made little of the \$40 on bananas. He seemed rather relieved" (BDA: McFarland to Kyes, Dec. 8, 1920). "Don Ricardo [the president of Costa Rica] asks for values. In order to avoid any conflict with Costa Rica tax returns and show what we have spent in Talamanca, use our investment figures. The Costa Ricans lack of knowledge of conditions and affairs in their own country is proverbial, and I have no intention of giving out data on our affairs until it is absolutely necessary to do so and then only generalities" (BDA: Chittenden to Blair, July 1, 1921).

17. According to a former Standard Fruit Company official the transnationals also engaged in extra-economic pressures against the incipient banana cartel in 1974. Standard Fruit Company spread the rumor that the United Fruit Company had paid someone to assassinate President Omar Torrijos of Panama, who was the primary impetus behind the movement to raise banana export taxes.

18. Labor unions have been unable to analyze the international constraints debilitating their strikes. A company official told me: "The unions are childish. It's such a small period out of the year that we make all our money. But the unions haven't figured that out yet. They always go on strike at the wrong time like in December or November when there's an oversupply on the world market. The best time to strike is March, April, or May. If they sat down and analyzed this they could be very dangerous." For example, during a two-month-long strike in its Limón Division in 1982, Del Monte merely augmented its exports from its Guatemala Division, thereby compensating for the production lost in Costa Rica.

19. The legal registration of the Chiriqui Land Company in Costa Rica is merely a formality to account for the portion of the Bocas Division (the Sixaola District) that overlaps into Costa Rica. In fact all administrative decisions in the Bocas Division have always been made by the Chiriqui Land Company's main offices in Panama and New York City (transferred in 1987 to Cincinnati).

20. Bocas del Toro Province is so dependent on United Fruit Company infrastructure that even the government security forces cannot perform their bodily functions without thanking the transnational as the following letters from local military officials document: "Now we have new toilets thanks to God and the collaboration of the Chiriqui Land Company and its men" (BDA: Solís to Lippa, Oct. 24, 1962). "The toilets of this unit were replaced with the grand

collaboration of the Chiriqui Land Company of which you are a worthy assistant manager. I beseech you to accept in my name and in that of the government of the republic profound gratitude for this altruistic gesture of yours" (BDA: Lippa to assistant manager, Oct. 29, 1962).

CHAPTER THREE. UNEQUAL CONFRONTATION: THE APPROPRIATION OF BRIBRI TERRITORY, 1908-1931

1. The Sixaola Bridge was completed illegally, without Costa Rican government permission (BDA: Chittenden to Cutter, July 12, 1921; Fournier 1974:41).

2. The process of land acquisition was extremely rapid. In 1913 the manager advised the Boston office that there were "10,000 hectares of good land available in the Talamanca valley" (BDA: Kyes to Schermerhorn, Jan. 29, 1913). By 1915, the manager reported that all of the company's land titles "[were] complete, not only in the Talamanca valley, but along the Sixaola" (BDA: Kyes to Cutter, Nov. 25, 1919). In 1920, the United Fruit Company's subsidiary in Bocas del Toro claimed ownership of a total of over 28,200 hectares of land in Costa Rica (BDA: Blair to Chittenden, July 12, 1921).

3. Such a low ratio of purchased bananas compared to company-produced bananas was typical of newly developed regions with fertile, virgin soils. A local Costa Rican rival, the Sixaola Banana Company, became increasingly successful in the early 1930s. It publicly complained of the United Fruit Company's unfair competitive tactics. Shortly thereafter, in 1935 the Sixaola Banana Company went bankrupt and the company purchased its infrastructure for \$27,000 (*La Voz del Atlántico*, March 9, 1935:1; Qucsada 1977:77).

4. From the Sixaola bridge to the port of Almirante, there were another 45 miles (see map 2). The figures on railroad mileage do not include the many switches and feeder lines that crisscrossed the network of farms throughout Talamanca. They added up to another 76 miles and included ten major bridges (BDA: Kyes to Schermerhorn, July 10, 1913). By 1925 the company had a total of 282.661 miles of track throughout the Bocas Division, with 36 steam engines operating 299 banana cars (BDA: Loose papers). Most of the production of the Bocas Division in the 1920s was located in the Talamanca Valley. A significant amount of fruit was also purchased from small producers in the Chiriqui Lagoon region (see map 2).

5. According to elderly Bribri, the evicted Amerindians were forced to take refuge in the surrounding mountains: "The company burned the huts so that the indigenous people would have to leave. They were forced to emigrate and most went to the headwaters of the rivers. As a matter of fact, that is what happened to my mother. They were all born up there in the headwaters of the Uren cause they could not coexist with the company" (Swaby 1982:14). Ironically the most serious legal impediment to the company's property titles in Talamanca was not related to Bribri living in the territory. Instead, the Costa Rican government raised objections because of an 1885 law that had reserved 1,500 hectares in Talamanca for a colonization scheme known as San Bernardo. Part

of the justification of the subsequently aborted San Bernardo settlement was to “attract to [Talamanca] whites in order to improve the Indians through contact with them” (ANCH #9496: June 20, 1888). By law no land within a 20-mile radius of the San Bernardo colony could be privately owned. The company managed to overcome this legal impediment through its influence in the highest spheres of the Costa Rican government as the following letter from the fiscal overseer of the Republic of Costa Rica to the secretary of state indicates: “If we were dealing with any other person we would take them to court . . . but I consider that this Company because of the respect which is owed to it, should not be subjected to such recourse” (BDA: Fiscal overseer to secretary of state, Aug. 12, 1919).

6. For example a North American geologist who surveyed Talamanca in the 1870s and 1880s wrote:

Less than two centuries ago, the population of Talamanca . . . numbered in the thousands. Today there are barely 1,200 souls. The Shelaba tribe has disappeared; the Changuines are about to be exterminated; the Tiribies [Teribe] population is composed of 103 souls; and Lyon [a North American residing in the Sixaola Valley] tells me that the Cabecar population along the Coen has been reduced by more than half in the last seventeen years, and the reduction of the Bribri population is only slightly less dramatic. (Gabb 1981: 113)

The Changuines in former days lived in the valley of the Changuinola River [heart of the Bocas Division today] . . . and they are, if not completely extinct, only represented by a handful of individuals, absorbed by their neighbors the Tiribies and by the Valientes [Coastal Guaymí]. (ibid.: 165)

7. In 1721 the governor of Talamanca requested the governor of Jamaica to return 2,000 Amerindians who had been abducted by Miskitu raiders and sold into slavery to British planters (Chacón de Umaña 1967: 97).

8. The Guaymí, Bribri, and Teribe Amerindians all have elaborate legends of the wars waged against the Miskitu invaders. The Guaymí, for example, attribute the genesis of the name of “Fever Beach” in the Chiriquí Lagoon to the poisoning of a Miskitu raiding party by a Guaymí shaman (*sukia*). According to the legend, a host of Guaymí women enticed a group of Miskitu invaders into partaking of a banquet of poisoned fruits. Similarly the Bribri attribute the origin of the Gandoca Lagoon to the damming of the Mata de Limón River by Bribri warriors who were preparing an ambush for a party of Miskitu raiders.

9. Other significant communities in the vicinity of the Bocas Division that have Miskitu names are Cahuita, Hone Creek, Gandoca (from *God dankan* or “thank God” because of the easy landing afforded by the Gandoca estuary to the invading Miskitu war parties). The most meridional Miskitu name along the Atlantic Coast is King Buppan (meaning “where the king anchored”) in the heart of coastal Guaymí territory in Chiriquí Lagoon.

10. The mound upon which the palm oil-processing plant (since aban-

doned) and workers' barracks of PAIS were located was said to be the ruins of a former Bribri settlement.

11. The unequal nature of the Bribri-transnational relationship was so extreme that, when I would press non-Amerindians for explanations of how the company managed to oust the Bribri from their lands in Talamanca, they would look at me with surprise as if I were simple-minded. It was taken as self-evident common sense that "progress" involves the expropriation of indigenous people. In fact, it was considered to be an almost self-defining cultural trait of Amerindians to retreat before the advance of whites. Indeed ethnologists throughout Latin America have documented the ideological legitimation for expropriating Amerindians on agricultural frontiers (cf. Whitten 1975).

12. Ethnic ambiguity and fluidity are typical of the Bribri and persist today. Bribri cultural absorption of West Indians was so extensive that it was institutionalized by the traditional Amerindian culture and a new clan was founded to incorporate the black Amerindians. Black Bribri today are treated exactly as if they were full-blooded Bribri despite the fact that some of them can shift their ethnic identities at their own convenience. In fact, there are cases of brothers who choose different ethnic identities—one black the other Bribri.

13. One of the assassinated Bribri leaders was the king's secretary, who was also the son of the previously cited North American geologist William Gabb (see note 6).

14. The Costa Rican anthropologist María Eugenia Bózzoli de Wille collected a similar "witchcraft account" of the spread of the Panama disease, which involved the burying of dead armadillos in the fields (personal communication).

CHAPTER FOUR. THE BRIBRI AND THE CASH ECONOMY: FROM SUBSISTENCE AGRICULTURALISTS TO SMALL FARMERS

1. The company's relationship to the Teribe Amerindians is somewhat comparable to the case of the Bribri. The Teribe live close to the plantation, but have historically shunned wage labor employment, supposedly because their moribund king was refused admission to the company's hospital in Almirante in 1920 (Gordon 1982: 153). Essentially they are semisubsistence peasants who sell cacao, fruits, and meat to intermediaries on the plantation. During my fieldwork fewer than a dozen Teribe worked for the company. The Teribe, however, did not lose their land to the transnational. They had fled upriver long before the arrival of the company because of the Miskitu raids of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Today some 1,000 Teribes live in "closed corporate" communities on the Panamanian side of the border, a few hours upriver from the plantation above a series of rapids. The Panamanian government recognizes their king and they have some rights to self-government.

Similarly, the Cabécar Amerindians, who are neighbors of the Bribri in Talamanca, have never worked for the transnational. I do not include the Cabécar Amerindians as one of the ethnic groups forming part of the plantation social

formation, however, as they reside so far up the rivers and on such isolated, marginal territory that they have never had extensive contact with the United Fruit Company. The Bribri's most powerful shamans (*sukias*) are Cabécars. This is interesting since the Bribri have dominated the Cabécar politically and economically for hundreds of years. Long before the arrival of the company the Bribri had conquered them militarily and pushed them upriver into the more marginal lands.

2. An elderly West Indian who worked in Talamancá in the 1910s provided me with an apt description of the limited level of the Bribri's precapitalist needs: "They don't use sugar like we; they don't use salt like we; you can't eat what they cook."

3. In the United States, Don Simón Mayorga would have been considered black; in Talamancá, however, he was unambiguously Amerindian. In fact, he was respected as an elder in the movement to preserve Bribri rights. Sadly he died as this manuscript was being written. I have included his real name in the text, therefore, to contribute in a small way to his memory.

4. During my fieldwork the Cabécar Amerindians who worked in the Standard Fruit Company's Estrella Valley District just north of Talamancá maintained a similarly marginal social integration with the rest of the labor force (see map 1). They descended from the nearby mountains to work periodically on the plantation but they did not live in company-provided housing. Instead they constructed temporary shelters in the jungle surrounding the plantation, hindering their incorporation into the labor union movement.

5. Once again, the Cabécar, who live on the Chirripó Reservation (see map 1), behave in a somewhat analogous fashion today as did the Bribri in the 1930s. They work intermittently on the cacao orchards of neighboring black farmers but they refuse employment with Hispanic farmers (Murillo and Hernández 1981: 148). They are only incipiently integrated into the money economy; their cash needs are limited and erratic. They cannot commit themselves to a rigid, let alone permanent, schedule of wage employment as they require flexibility in order to be able to return to their farms to tend to their families and crops. The black cacao producers in the Matina area allow for this kind of flexibility since their farms are smaller, older, less technified, more diversified, and less rigidly capitalist than those of the Hispanics (*ibid.*: 136). Another factor encouraging the Cabécar to work exclusively for black farmers is the fact that the Hispanics are relative newcomers to the region and are not so familiar with the local style of interpersonal relations and interethnic discourse. In fact, many black farmers in the region probably have Amerindian half-brothers or cousins. The Hispanics, on the other hand, are awkward and more racist than the blacks in their dealings with the Amerindians.

6. This description of the successful "peasantization" of the Bribri only applies to those Amerindians who reside in the area of the United Fruit Company's former influence, in the flat lands of the Talamancá Valley near the arteries of road and river transport. In the highlands of the Reservation the Amerindians still participate only marginally in the external economy. This is especially true for the Cabécar, many of whom live in regions that can only be

reached by ten or more days' hiking through the jungle. Furthermore, even in the relatively accessible portions of the Reservation certain aspects of the traditional relations of production, such as the reciprocal labor exchange arrangements, coexist with more formal wage labor relations.

7. The superior nutritional status of the banana worker children is probably due, in large part, to the potable water provided by the company, and to the availability of free medical care on the plantation.

8. For example, a Costa Rican beauty queen announced to the press upon returning from a visit to Japan: "In Japan they know very little about Costa Rica. Imagine! They even thought that we were pure Indians. I told them about our democracy and that there was no such thing as pure Indians here" (*La Prensa Libre*, Nov. 9, 1983: 3).

9. The Bribri are not so intimidated by blacks as by Hispanics. On several occasions I heard Bribri men make racist statements about blacks, claiming they were "passive," and "never progress."

10. Some literary critics and anthropologists (Duncan n.d.: 3; Purcell 1982: 81) have noted that Fallas reproduces racist stereotypes against blacks and Amerindians in his book on Talamanca. This is certainly true, especially with respect to blacks (cf. Fallas 1978a: 134). If one considers that he was writing in the 1930s without the benefit of intellectual scrutiny, however (Fallas was from a poor family and had no formal education), his book is remarkably sensitive to the issue of ethnic oppression, especially with respect to the Bribri, but also, to a lesser extent, toward the black population (cf. *ibid.*: 26; see chapter 6, note 10).

11. Increasingly Talamanqueños are cultivating marihuana since it is a more remunerative alternative cash crop than cacao or plantains. Because it is illegal and involves large sums of money, the marihuana industry attracts professional narcotic smugglers and violence. In fact, during my fieldwork, there were several marihuana- and cocaine-related assassinations in Talamanca.

12. This North American rent collector also used to treat snakebite victims. Apparently, he would demand payment of ten dollars or five chickens in advance from his patients before administering the snakebite serum even when they were on the verge of dying.

13. The success of the Volio population in preventing their forcible eviction in September 1980 contrasts dramatically with the company's removal, only a few days earlier, of all the Hispanic squatters who were occupying the community of Margarita less than 15 kilometers south of Volio. The Margarita squatters were recent arrivals to the region, and were members of a militant peasant union, FENAC. The surrounding population in Talamanca and Sixaola accused the immigrants in Margarita of being "communists, land speculators," and "violent drunkards of a lower cultural level" with "no respect for private property." The FENAC-organized squatters, consequently, received no solidarity from the surrounding populace and were carted away to the Central Highlands by the Rural Guard in trucks and buses without any local protest.

14. William Walker was a North American filibuster who invaded Central America in 1855. He managed to seize the presidency of Nicaragua, where he

reinstated slavery and made English the official language. He was finally overcome militarily by an army formed by a coalition of Central American nations in which Costa Rica played an important role.

CHAPTER FIVE. WEST INDIAN IMMIGRATION AND THE ORIGINS OF THE BANANA INDUSTRY

1. In the mid-1800s before bananas had even been discovered as a cash crop, the problem of finding a labor force to develop the Sixaola Valley region was noted by a North American explorer and geologist who was performing a survey of potential mineral deposits for Minor C. Keith (who was later to found the United Fruit Company): "In the spacious lowlands around the banks of the Telire [Sixaola River] are thousands of acres of good land perfect for the cultivation of sugar but today occupied only by some 200 people. . . . The paramount problem is finding labor power. There are few Indians and they are not accustomed to hard labor" (Gabb 1981: 102-3).

2. When Minor Keith inaugurated his railroad and banana operations in Limón Province just north of Bocas Province in the 1870s and 1880s, he was prevented by the large coffee estate owners of Costa Rica from offering competitive wages that would threaten their access to labor during the coffee harvest season. In fact, in order to obtain permission to import foreign workers, Keith promised to release his workers "in time for the 1875 coffee harvest . . . irrespective of the advance of the railroad [in order to make] 14,000 to 15,000 of the best class of workers . . . [available] without distraction . . . [for] agricultural [labor]" (*Gaceta Oficial*, April 11, 1874: 3).

3. The Chinese who were brought over as indentured workers revolted on several occasions. Their working conditions were akin to slavery; they were bought and sold on the open market, whipped when they misbehaved; and in some cases actually executed (e.g., Casey 1975: 163; Fallas Monge 1983: 208-15; Zaida 1979: 45). In fact, they proved to "have a decided inclination to suicide" (*Gaceta Oficial*, June 19, 1875: 2, cited in Duncan and Meléndez 1981: 81).

Unfortunately space constraints do not permit a detailed analysis of the Chinese immigrant experience although they continue to have a small but significant presence in Bocas del Toro and Limón. Throughout the late 1800s and early 1900s, despite the immigration prohibitions, they entered the region illegally. They were sometimes delivered as merchandise hiding inside barrels. Apparently many drowned while attempting to swim ashore at night from ships whose captains contracted to smuggle them. Most of those who survived became vegetable farmers and later retail merchants. Today, along the Atlantic Coast of Central America (and indeed in much of South America) Chinese shopkeepers abound even in the most isolated communities. They have maintained a closed society with strong internal ethnic solidarity, establishing self-help savings and loan associations. Every major urban center on the Atlantic Coast of Central America has a Chinese association, and most of the region's cemeteries

have a section reserved for the Chinese colony. The Chinese behave in an almost castelike manner, minimizing their social contact with non-Chinese, and speaking exclusively Chinese in the home. The offspring of mixed unions are ostracized by the Chinese community. Many Chinese men, consequently, import their spouses (sight unseen) directly from Taiwan or Hong Kong, and it is not uncommon in Bocas to see newly immigrated, young, monolingual Chinese women working the cash register in their husband's shop.

4. Keith petitioned the Costa Rican Congress to reimburse his expenses for importing the Italian laborers on the grounds that he was "bettering the racial stock" of the country. He cited as precedent the government subsidies on imports of highbred cattle to improve local racial stock (ANCH #1131: Feb. 23, 1888: 3).

5. Three of Minor Keith's brothers and uncles also died while supervising the construction of the first 25 miles of the Costa Rican trans-Atlantic railroad (Wilson 1947: 52, 59).

6. Blacks died in higher proportions than whites in the tropical lowlands because of their inferior living conditions, dangerous work sites, and segregated health care. For example, in 1906 President Roosevelt noted that the death rate for blacks on the Panama Canal was 59 per thousand compared to 17 per thousand for whites (cited in McCullough 1977: 501).

Racist discourse today justifies the historical use of black labor in unhealthy working conditions on the grounds that they have a natural resistance to tropical disease: "Blacks are good at drinking bad water [*son buenos para beber aguas negras*]." Ironically, however, one of the justifications for Hispanic opposition to the immigration of blacks to the Central Highlands of Costa Rica at the turn of the century was that they were more susceptible to yellow fever and malaria (Olien 1967: 104).

7. Malaria was by far the biggest cause of sickness. For example, in 1920, 7,156 cases of malaria were treated in the Bocas Division, followed by 776 cases of gonorrhea and 453 of syphilis (BDA: Monthly Clinical Report, Year 1920, Medical Department, Panama Division).

8. There is considerable documentation of West Indian labor organizing on the Panama Canal. See, for example, Franco 1979; Gandasegui n.d.; Davis 1980; Conniff 1983, 1985; Lewis 1980; Newton 1983, 1984.

9. In addition to de la Cruz 1979, passing references to labor disturbances by black immigrant laborers in the late 1800s can be found in de la Cruz 1983: 94, 105–21; Duncan and Meléndez 1981: 78; Kepner 1936: 180–81; Fallas Monge 1983: 218–19.

10. The company imported the St. Kitts strikebreakers into Limón illegally by registering them as merchandise with local customs officials (de la Cruz 1979: 42).

11. The Baptist minister who was the main leader of the 1918–19 Sixaola strike was "invited" by the governor of Limón to the capital of the province to provide "testimony in court." Upon his arrival, however, he was jailed (BCO #318-350-2946: McAdam to Murray, April 28, 1919).

12. Examples of United Fruit Company divide-and conquer tactics in other

countries abound. For example, in 1928 the company requested to the Colombian government permission to import 10,000 West Indian workers following a strike by its primarily Hispanic labor force in that country (*New York Times*, April 6, 1929, cited in Kepner 1936:200). The transnational's arch rival (the then fledgling Standard Fruit Company) resorted to the same strategy when it imported Jamaicans to Puerto Cabezas on the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua in the early 1930s to break a strike of primarily Hispanic workers (Gutiérrez 1977:60).

The most spectacular example in Costa Rica of a foreign company manipulating black-Hispanic antagonisms is the case of the Abangares gold mines (in which Minor Keith, the founder of the United Fruit Company, had financial interests) in the Province of Guanacaste (García 1984:17). In 1911 black West Indians were brought in as foremen to supervise the largely Hispanic work force; all fifty foremen at the mines were black and black ditch diggers were paid more than Hispanics (*ibid.*:57-62). One of the tasks of the foremen was to strip-search workers suspected of stealing gold from the mines at the end of the day as they were leaving the pits. In 1911 this practice provoked a race riot. A mob of incensed workers brutally killed fourteen blacks (*ibid.*:57-62; José León Sánchez 1971:107-8). Although the workers occupied the mines and a strike was declared, their anger was vented against their immediate supervisors who were blacks rather than against the North American owners of the mines. Despite a protest from the queen of England, no workers were prosecuted for the massacre and the president of Costa Rica even publicly blamed the "foreigners" (i.e., West Indian blacks) for having provoked the workers into killing them.

13. In Costa Rica Hispanics are referred to as whites.

14. The Communist party newspaper addressed the issue of racism in its editorials in 1934: "The bourgeoisie has a hidden agenda: to make the national workers think that their terrible situation is due, not to the capitalist system, but rather to competition from the workers of color. . . . They are trying to divert the workers' struggle from its real objectives and substitute the class struggle, which they are so afraid of, with a stupid and suicidal racial struggle" (*Trabajo*, Dec. 16, 1934).

15. On the Panama Canal during World War II relations between black and Hispanic workers were so strained that two separate unions for each ethnic group were established (Conniff 1983:10). Even dark-skinned Panamanians were refused membership in the Hispanic union (*ibid.*). When blacks and Hispanics finally joined forces in a nonsegregated union later in the decade, the governor of the Canal Zone confidently predicted its imminent downfall: "[It is composed of] two essentially incompatible elements—Latin Americans and West Indian Negroes—and I believe that if it is allowed to go its way unmolested it will soon begin to lose strength and eventually perhaps fall apart" (PCCF #2-P-71: Mehaffey to Wood, Oct. 25, 1946, cited in Conniff 1983:7).

16. The diversity of the Bocas labor force was so great in 1913 that the Catholic bishop was obliged to deliver his sermon in three languages (English, French and Spanish) when he visited Almirante (Reports of the Catholic Bishops 1899-1916:313).

17. For example: "The blacks from St. Kitts are distinguishable from the Jamaicans by their clothing; they are barefoot and covered in rags. The depth of their misery and sadness is etched in their eyes and movements; they're an unhappy people" (*La Información*, Nov. 27, 1910:3).

18. On the Panama Canal these internal black immigrant differentiations were even more pronounced. Sociologist Raymond Davis (1980: 115-16) found references in the Panama Canal Commission Files of Canal Zone Police reports written by infiltrators in the Colón labor union who successfully pitted the different islanders against one another in 1915. After documenting the successful importation of Fortune Islanders to break a railroad strike on the Canal, Davis concludes, "Cheap West Indian labor could be replaced by yet cheaper Black labor" (*ibid.*: 80).

19. In 1925 a U.S. union newspaper complained that cheap Jamaican labor represented one of the biggest problems faced by maritime workers in the Americas: "Whenever a strike has been declared or there has been a lack of workers through circumstances, the company has always resorted to Jamaica, which seems to have an inexhaustible source of cheap help, to get them out of any troubles" (*Solidaridad*, April 4, 1925).

CHAPTER SIX. BLACK UPWARD MOBILITY

1. The most systematic and well-documented analysis of black upward mobility in Limón is provided by Charles Koch (1975).

2. Peasant cultivation techniques retard the spread of Panama disease since peasants farm smaller areas, space their banana plants at greater distances, intercrop with diverse cultivations, and provide more intensive care (Koch 1975:163).

3. A company official in Limón wrote in the 1930s: "When a territory begins to produce larger quantities of poor quality fruit and the total exports begin to decline, the company is delighted to purchase rather than produce most of the fruit exported from that field; but is very very careful not to show its delight" (cited in Kepner and Soothill 1935: 272).

4. Another factor that contributed to the company's early retreat from cacao production in Talamanca was the repeated land invasions by the local black and Bribri population. The Limón Division was even more subject to land invasions owing to its greater geographical accessibility to the rest of Costa Rica. Squatters obliged the company to accept a larger role as commercializer rather than producer in the Limón Division at an early date. By contrast, the inaccessibility of the Bocas Division (especially the Sixaola District) enabled the company to maintain direct control over the cacao production process until the late 1950s.

5. Trouillot (1988:chap. 7) also argues convincingly that small "peasant" banana producers in Dominica are better understood as disguised wagedworkers for Geest Corporation, the transnational that commercializes their produce.

6. The technique of assuming West Indian descent from a British surname has been used by several anthropologists and historians studying Limón (*cf.*

Koch 1975: 378). It underestimates the actual number of West Indians, since a significant number have adopted Spanish surnames. In this particular list ("Sixaola Squatters"), however, the technique probably overestimates the number of West Indians since some Bribri have British last names.

7. See, for example, the fieldwork accounts of Bryce-Laporte 1962; Koch 1975; Mennerick 1964; Moock 1972; Murillo and Hernández 1981; Olien 1967, 1977; Purcell 1982).

8. In the context of these conversations I was apparently viewed as a North American rather than merely as a white.

9. A black Colombian describes the sense of "cultural superiority" blacks have over Hispanics throughout the circum-Caribbean region: "We are . . . more civilized than . . . [Hispanics] both hygienically and politically and we have always been better educated. Literacy here is close to 100 percent" (cited in Parsons 1956: 53).

10. The most poignant description of the human cost of the massive black emigration in the first years of World War II is provided by Fallas, who hiked all one night through the mountains of Talamanca with a caravan of blacks attempting to cross into Panama illegally:

We walked in silence, poised against danger. . . . The bodies of the men with their arms over their heads were hunched over beneath the weight of their big bulky bags. . . . They dragged through the centuries the heavy albatross of their black burnt skin? Where were they to find their promised land?

They had fled the slave catchers through the African jungle; they stained with their blood the chains of the deep bellies of the slave ships; they groaned beneath the whip of the slave driver . . . ; they fled through the tropical underbrush pursued by their masters' hunting dogs. It is as if the wheel of history does not stop for blacks: for them there was no French Revolution, Lincoln did not exist. . . . And now the poor Costa Rican blacks, after having enriched with their blood the great banana magnates, were forced to flee in the night through the jungle, dragging their little children along with them. The slave catcher's dogs were no longer chasing them: their persecutor was the phantom of misery. What was waiting for them on the other side of the border? Where were they going to lay down their bones? (1978a: 26)

Massive relocations of thousands of able-bodied laborers across large distances represent another cost of production/reproduction that the United Fruit Company and the other transnational corporations in need of labor were able, for the most part, to pass on to the subsistence sector. An old watchman in Bocas who had not succeeded in acquiring a plot of land complained to me: "Just look at me. I'm an old bag of skin and bones. Like a flea-ridden dog, I've dragged myself all over the world, even through the swamps of Colombia following this son-of-a-bitch company faithfully. And all I ever got were kicks in the rear."

11. It is impossible to obtain exact figures on remittances from the United States, but they have been important to the economies of Limón and Bocas.

12. For example, coincidentally, the nurse who attended me in New York City, where I was forced to return during my fieldwork when I became ill with hepatitis, was Panamanian of West Indian descent, from Bocas del Toro. Black emigration to the United States has been just as pronounced along the rest of the Atlantic littoral in Central America. Edmund Gordon notes the case of Bluefields, Nicaragua: "Virtually every Bluefields family has at least one member in Brooklyn, Miami, or San Francisco" (1985:129).

13. Education has played a crucial role in black upward mobility, and is part of the West Indian immigrant tradition. Today blacks still maintain scholastic superiority over Hispanics. In 1983, 55.4 percent of Hispanics did not finish primary school in Limón; the same was true for only 38.5 percent of blacks (Vargas and Requeyra 1983:44). Once again, this advantage over Hispanics has been confined, for the most part, to the middle-level echelons of the hierarchy, that is, primary school and high school rather than college. Until the 1960s few blacks reached the university level. In 1964, for example, out of the entire black population in Limón (over 10,000) according to a resident researcher there were only four black lawyers, one civil engineer, and five professors (Mennerick 1964:50). By the 1970s, with the extended boom in the cacao economy, the children of successful cacao farmers have entered the professional occupations in large numbers; today there are so many black professionals dispersed throughout Costa Rica that it would be impossible to calculate their number.

14. In the case of Panama, as an exception to the rule that Hispanics dominate the highest echelons in the occupational hierarchy, the minister of labor was of West Indian descent at the time of my fieldwork.

15. This man began his career as a commissary clerk with the company in the 1930s. In 1957, because of his good relations with his superiors, he was leased the entire network of stores operated on the Costa Rican side of the Bocas Division. He eventually bought all the company's liquor patents, and since alcohol sales are by far the most profitable commercial venture in the region, he rapidly built himself a sizable personal fortune.

16. Unfortunately, the technique for quantifying ethnicity by occupational task based on the first number of the identity card of each worker listed on the February 1983 payroll (see preface, note 4) cannot be used to identify blacks. Although most blacks are from Bocas and hence have identity numbers that begin with "1," many Hispanics from Bocas also have cards that begin with the same first number.

17. I was told by a young black man that "8,000 colones a month is good money for a woman."

18. The most frequent racist epithet directed against blacks in Bocas is "crow." The terms *chumeca* and *chombo* (derivative of the Spanish pronunciation of Jamaican) are also frequently used in a derogatory fashion (see Rout 1976:275-78).

CHAPTER SEVEN. IDEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE
BLACK EXPERIENCE

1. Segregation in the Bocas Division, however, was mild in comparison to the more rigidly racist organization of the Panama Canal Zone, where, according to a resident in 1912, "caste lines are as sharply drawn as in India. . . . The Brahmins are the 'gold' employees, white American citizens with all the advantages and privileges thereto appertaining. But—and herein we out-Hindu the Hindus . . . caste itself is divided and subdivided into infinitesimal gradations. Every rank and shade of man has a different salary, and exactly in accordance with that salary is he housed, furnished, and treated down to the least item—number of electric lights, candle-power, style of bed, size of bookcase" (Franck 1913: 219).

2. As noted in the preface I was surprised initially by the frequent public expressions of racism by high-level company officials. I expected them to be sophisticated enough to restrain themselves from making bigoted remarks in front of a cultural anthropologist. Racist assumptions, however, were such an integral part of their thinking that it did not occur to them that a properly attired, well-mannered, and educated white North American would not share fully in their prejudice.

3. I met a young black management-level employee in the Engineering Department who claimed that he qualified for residence in the White Zone, but that because of the racism of the whites he did not feel comfortable living there, and chose instead to live in a predominantly black section of the border town of Guabito.

4. The school is so North American-oriented that it adhered to the United States schedule of vacations rather than the Panamanian one.

5. As late as 1930, on one of the Honduran divisions, "the overseers [foremen] . . . consisted of six North Americans, three Britishers, two Spaniards, three Mexicans, two white Jamaicans, four Hondurans and two citizens of other Central American countries. Of the time keepers five were North American and eleven were Hondurans" (Kepner 1936: 176).

6. An elderly black who had worked as a conductor explained to me that there was, in fact, no law prohibiting blacks from reaching San José by railroad. He claimed the company pretended such a law existed in order to avoid paying overnight *per diems* to workers from Limón. Indeed, there are numerous accounts of excursions by black shoppers and tourists to San José in newspapers from the 1920s (Purcell 1982: 89). Furthermore, both the 1927 and 1950 censuses note the existence of small numbers of blacks in the Central Highlands (DGE 1953 and 1960: 91, cited in Duncan and Meléndez 1981: 84).

7. In 1936 the municipality of Limón deported a dozen mentally retarded blacks to Jamaica even though they had been born in Costa Rica (*La Voz del Atlántico*, Sept. 5, 1936: 5, cited in Casey 1979: 131).

8. Ironically today Arnulfo Arias denies his past racism. Most blacks and Amerindians voted for him in the 1984 elections and even in the 1968 ones.

9. The most systematic, detailed discussion of internalized racism among blacks in Limón is provided by anthropologist Trevor Purcell, himself a black of West Indian descent: "We often hear self-deprecatory comments from Blacks such as: 'We Black people no good,' or 'you cannot trust Black people,' or even more specific ones such as 'Black man cannot run business,' or such and such a job 'is white man job'" (Purcell 1982:26, 301-2). Purcell, also reports fragments of conversations with black children on this subject: "I am Black in skin but not in mind. Blacks are ugly. I only have Spanish friends" (ibid.:99, 303, 304). He cites the comment of a black mother whose nine-year-old daughter preferred whites to blacks: "She don't like Blacks. . . . She always asking me in the streets why is it that Negroes so ugly. The other day she told me that she wanted a new father but not a negro this time" (ibid.:97). Another attempt to discuss internalized racism in the Bocas-Limón region is a series of 280 interviews performed in Limón by Costa Rican graduate students in history (Fernández and Méndez 1973:221-28). Eighty percent of the blacks interviewed stated that they would rather have been white; only 68 percent were satisfied with being black, compared to 77 percent of the Hispanics. Though 80 percent of all Hispanics assigned greater prestige to whites, only 15 percent of the blacks thought that being black was more prestigious. The amateurish methodology of this study, however, as well as the highly impressionistic nature of the questions posed, renders this kind of survey data of dubious precision; especially since the responses must have been affected dramatically by the complexion and attitude of the interviewer.

10. Some elderly blacks who had spent time in the United States during their youth told me that they did not like North American blacks and made racist generalizations against them. The statements against U.S. blacks were probably partially aimed at developing good relations with me. Since they knew from experience that relations between blacks and whites in the United States are tense they wanted to make sure that I would not place them in the same category as they assumed I placed U.S. blacks.

11. Scholarly and political opinion on Marcus Garvey is divided and often polemical. The two classic books, each with different perspectives, are Cronon (1955) and Martin (1976). Under the direction of Robert Hill, the African Studies Center at the University of California at Los Angeles has started the Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers Project and is preparing a multivolume annotated compilation of documents relevant to Marcus Garvey and the UNIA. Four volumes of this project have been published since 1983 by University of California Press. They contain valuable primary source material for a reinterpretation of the historical significance of Marcus Garvey.

12. During the 1920s the company was chary of anything that might render its laborers aware of their advantage in acting concertedly. For example, in 1924, in response to queries from headquarters about the possibility of instituting a health insurance plan for laborers in the tropics a Bocas official vehemently opposed the plan on the grounds that it might inspire workers to form a

union, “The least [*sic*] they know about organizing the better” (BDA: Director of Shipping to Blair, June 11, 1924).

13. J. Edgar Hoover, head of the Federal Bureau of Investigation in the United States, also maintained a close surveillance of Marcus Garvey during his Central America trips. Hoover was instrumental in the jailing and subsequent deportation of Garvey from the United States in 1927 (Hill 1983: 79).

14. Company officials also wrote desperately to the president of Panama in an effort to persuade him to resort to repression of UNIA representatives:

Labor conditions [are] becoming quite serious by reason of press propaganda [of the] Negro World and [the] Bocas newspapers. . . . [It is] becoming a question of race more than anything else. . . . the whole trend of their minds is being guided by the “Negro World.” . . . The “Negro World” is really at the bottom of all dissatisfaction among the laborers; it is circulated widely in this Province and its influence is remarkable. Whenever a couple of negroes get to talking it is usually concerning some articles which appeared in the Negro World. In last week’s Bocas Express an article appeared stating that no white people would be permitted to ride on any Black Star Line [UNIA-owned] ships. . . . If some action is not quickly taken to prevent this . . . Panama will soon be having labor trouble in comparison to which those in the States have been enjoyable picnics. (BDA: McFarland to Arias, Nov. 17, 1919)

15. Not all chapters obeyed the UNIA headquarters’ directive to stay out of the labor movement. A local leader, for example, was deported from British Honduras [Belize] for leading a strike against the United Fruit Company in the 1920s (Martin 1976: 73).

16. The conservatism of the progeny of black immigrants has been noted in other parts of the Central American Atlantic Coast as well. For a discussion of the political attitudes of blacks on the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua see Gordon (1985: 230–36) and Bourgois (1985: 208–10).

17. See Knapp and Knapp (1984: 163–67) for a biased, but interesting, discussion of pro–North America and anti-Hispanic sentiment among blacks in the Canal Zone when the Panama Canal was returned to the Panamanian government in 1978. At the same time that blacks favored the United States they also told me that they knew that North Americans were racist. In fact, the reputation of North American racism was so strong that blacks frequently told me: “Unlike in the United States, there is no racism in Costa Rica.”

18. I interviewed this former black Costa Rican Communist party leader who now owns a prosperous clothing store in San José. He has become fervently anticommunist and denies any differences whatsoever in attitudes between whites and blacks in Costa Rica.

19. Koch (1975: 273, chap. 10) documents that blacks in Limón have historically been accused of laziness in periods when they have been able to reject agricultural wage work in favor of independent farming. As he points out, however, “this was ‘indolence’ with a purpose”; when the world market prices for cacao or bananas were high, more money could be made by cultivating a private

farm than by working for a landowner (Koch 1975: 273). Indeed the phenomenon whereby widespread access to land breeds poor work discipline, and “laziness,” has been documented by numerous authors in different societies (cf. Edelman 1985: 39).

CHAPTER EIGHT. THE GUAYMI BECOME BANANA WORKERS

1. Some anthropologists prefer to refer to the Guaymí by the name they call themselves—*Ngawbere* (personal communication, Keith Bletzer; cf. Young 1971). In the plantation context, however, they refer to themselves as Guaymí; hence I am using that term here.

2. Figure 2 on the ethnicity of day laborers in the Bocas Division was calculated from an 11-percent random sample taken from the company's computerized labor roster for the month of February 1983. The ethnicity of the laborers was determined by the first number of their identity cards, which indicates where they were born. Only those born on the Guaymí Indian Reservation (i.e., those whose numbers begin with “1PI”) were counted as Guaymí. The actual number of Guaymí on the plantation, consequently may be higher, since some Guaymí are born off the Reservation and others change the initial numbers on their identity cards so as not to appear to be “fresh from the mountains.”

3. In 1983, 1,610 Guaymí also lived on three reservations in Puntarenas Province in Costa Rica. They emigrated in the 1930s and 1940s from Chiriquí Province in Panama because of a scarcity of land (personal communication, Jorge Luis Gamboa Quirós, National Council of Indigenous Affairs [CONAI], San José).

4. “The Guaymí population has become a huge seasonal unskilled labor pool which supplies the agrarian industries of Chiriquí with a cheap source of manual labor during the peak demand periods of the agricultural cycle” (Bort 1976: 57).

5. Time constraints and logistical difficulties prevented me from visiting Guaymí communities off of the plantation. I have no fieldwork observations of the Guaymí outside the plantation context.

6. Perhaps the most dramatic example of how disadvantaged the Guaymí have been in their dealings with the outside world is their practice of sending infant sons and daughters to live with black families on Bocas Island in order for them to learn English, acquire literacy skills, and learn how to maneuver in non-Amerindian society. In 1956, a visiting anthropologist estimated that there were between two and three hundred such Guaymí children on Bocas Island (Gordon 1957: 11). This practice of childhood indentureship is also prevalent in Chiriquí Province on the Pacific watershed where the Chiriquí Guaymí send their children (sometimes as young as six or seven years old) to work as servants and maids in non-Amerindian households (cf. Ferguson and Santamaría 1962: 77). Obviously the potential for abuse in these arrangements is great. The Reverend Pascal, a Methodist missionary, explained to me: “Many of the Indians

gave their children to the families of natives who treated them only a stage above serfdom and never sent them to school" (personal letter from Reverend Pascal, Nov. 9, 1983: 2). The owner of the hotel where I stayed on Bocas Island had one of these young Guaymí boys who did all the cleaning and administering of the hotel. The owner told me, "He's a good boy. I've never had any trouble with him."

7. In the company's Armuelles Division on the Pacific Coast of Panama, the company employed Guaymí as early as 1939 but strictly on an informal basis. They did not sign a work contract, pay taxes, receive medical benefits, or benefit from job tenure (Ferguson and Santamaría 1962: 18).

8. Reverend Pascal wrote me, "I did participate in the initial contact when the Guaymí Indians began to leave the fastnesses of the Cricamola mountains. The coastal Indians were at first reluctant to go out to work but later when they learnt to read and write first in the Methodist church schools and then later when the government took over, they became useful as railroaders and brakemen" (Dec. 30, 1983).

9. The pioneering of education and the instilling of the values of the "civilized world" by the Methodist Church in Bocas parallels on a smaller scale the dramatic penetration of the Moravian Church among the Miskitu Amerindians on the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua forty years earlier when the banana companies and North American extractive industries (mining and logging) first arrived in that region (cf. Borhek 1949: 12; Gordon 1985: 127; Mueller 1932: 148-49).

10. There is some confusion with the Guaymí term *cacique*; it is not a formally defined status: "The Guaymí use the term *cacique* to describe almost all achieved leadership statuses. A *cacique* in the Guaymí sense is an individual who becomes influential because of personal qualities" (Bort 1983: 64).

CHAPTER NINE. GUAYMI CONJUGATED OPPRESSION: RACE AND CLASS

1. A good indication of the level of absolute poverty among the Guaymí was provided by a 1977-78 study of 500 Guaymí of all ages in Veraguas Province. One hundred percent were found to be malnourished (cited in Young and Bort 1979: 110, n. 16). Malnutrition continues to be a serious problem among the Bocas Guaymí who live on or near the plantation. For example, a primary school teacher in Bocas told me that her school began a program of free breakfasts for Guaymí children because they were arriving to class in the morning so weak with hunger that they would pass out or be incapable of concentrating on their lessons.

2. A Costa Rican Hispanic first brought to my attention that the company took advantage of the Guaymí by paying them by the hour for unpleasant tasks normally remunerated on a piecework basis. He pointed to a crew of Amerindians wading through the bottom of a six-meter-deep drainage canal: "Look how they treat those poor *cholos* [*mira como tienen a los pobrecitos cholos*]. They're probably paying them by the hour for that lousy work. Do you realize

how many snakes there are down there? The company doesn't even pay them for the ones they kill. They give us 50 colones [\$1.00] per snake."

3. The documentation from the Medical Department's archives justifies the rhetorical tone in the following passage taken from a political pamphlet published in the 1930s: "The banana company is a machine for destroying Indians: it destroys them morally and materially. The company pitilessly takes advantage of the Indians condemning them to a life of vice or a premature death. The exhausting work is reserved for the Indians, killing them or making them flee from the farms. Thousands of Panamanian Indians have been made sick, only to be fired. You can see them passing crammed into trucks heading for Tole and other [Indian] regions" (Solano 1931:n.p.). On a less polemical note, analysts otherwise sympathetic to the company have also documented this practice: "Once they are sick, the company dispenses with their services and they return disabled and poor to their communities where they usually die since the indigenous regions lack the most rudimentary health care services" (Ferguson and Santamaria 1962:82).

4. One of the workers poisoned by nematicide was a Guaymí who had been overexposed while spreading Mocap in the Sixaola District on the Costa Rican side of the division. He went to recuperate with his family on the Panama side; consequently, his health bills were not covered by the Panamanian medical system.

5. The head of the National Health Service for Bocas del Toro Province told me that these medical studies on nematicides "had to be hushed up" as a "sacrifice for the good of the national economy."

6. The airplane pilots spraying these pesticides are paid on a piece-rate basis. Consequently, they try to dump as much of the chemical as possible as fast as possible. They spray almost indiscriminately over the workers' barracks, the primary schools (which are located only a few yards from the edge of the farms), and the road. In fact, on one occasion I was dowsed while riding my motorcycle. Several hours later my throat and eyes were burning and my skin was covered by a rash.

7. Most of the statistics in this section were taken from the Bocas Division's computerized labor roster. It does not include approximately 450 workers on the Costa Rican side of the border, where the ethnic hierarchy was distinct as there were no Guaymí or Kuna in the Costa Rican labor force.

8. The percentages for Guaymí in specified skilled tasks are based on absolute numbers determined by counting every single employee who is not a day laborer. For example, according to the labor roster there was a total of 158 foremen and 95 assistant foremen in the Bocas Division.

9. I was told that in the 1960s virtually no Guaymí worked in the packing plants. Consequently, the Guaymí show a slight upward mobility in the occupational hierarchy but only minimal. The same proportion of Guaymí assistant foremen to Guaymí foremen reveals that this upward mobility is not well established.

10. A harvesting squad is generally composed of one cutter, who selects and cuts the banana stem, two backers who carry the stems to the overhead cables,

one hanger who hangs the stems on the cable, and a hauler who slides the stems along an overhead cable to the packing plant.

11. The observations on the ratio of the salaries of harvesters to packers are based on field visits in the summer of 1983 to United Fruit Company plantations in Honduras and Costa Rica and to a former Standard Fruit Company plantation in Nicaragua.

12. For example, on a day that the packers earned \$15 to \$17 the harvesters took home between \$11 and \$12.

13. In the early 1930s, when the company opened up the Armuelles Division on the Pacific Coast (see map 1), large numbers of Chiriquí Guaymí were recruited to clear the virgin jungle: "Labor recruiters [went] into the mountains where the Guaymí live, a population of docile Indians who lived out of civilization's reach. In those years in the beginning they constituted the principal working population in Armuelles" (May and Plaza 1958: 223).

14. I met a young man who was fired by the subcontractor when he developed a hernia from loading heavy boxes. He, his wife, and newborn baby had no place to sleep. He was unable to maintain a job as an agricultural laborer in the surrounding region because of his hernia.

15. Panama uses the U.S. dollar instead of printing its own currency.

16. It is not clear to what extent the higher levels of the company administration were involved in the underpaying of the Guaymí through small denomination bills. The Comptroller's Office, however, cooperated in the scheme by accumulating large reserves of small denomination bills at the subcontractor's request. The Guaymí received their payment at a company pay car, and the paymaster was directly employed by the transnational. The paymaster told me, "It was good business for the company. We used to pay the Indians with five *colon* bills in Costa Rica and then cross back to [Panama] to change their *colones* [to dollars]."

17. The labor process in Sixaola was so hierarchical that in the task of pruning, for example, instead of teaching the Guaymí workers how to select which banana sucker to prune, the company sent an experienced Hispanic through the farms first to mark with a ribbon all the suckers to be removed. Subsequently, a squad of Guaymí from Cricamola would pass through and cut out the tagged suckers. Normally when the company intends to keep workers on a permanent basis, they are trained how to prune.

18. The company's pay car looks like a caravan as it moves from farm to farm, with a string of Gallego merchants in air-conditioned pickup trucks and station wagons following close behind. As soon as the pay car stops, the merchants position themselves at the exit door and sometimes literally physically grab the Guaymí workers as they step out with their money in hand.

19. As an added enticement, the Gallego salesmen cancel anyone's debt whose invoice number coincides with the weekly drawing of the national lottery.

20. The experience of overwhelming ethnic discrimination in a context of class exploitation is in no way specific to the Guaymí; nor does it necessarily lead to political demobilization or ethnically segregated resistance movements. In a powerful testimonial autobiography, a Quiché Maya woman who has since

emerged as a leader of the class-based opposition movement to the Guatemalan government reflects on the humiliation of being both exploited economically and also ridiculed ethnically during her childhood every time she went to the market town, which was dominated by Hispanics. She specifically notes the extra motivation for political struggle that this conjugation of economic and ideological oppression provided in her life:

I began thinking of my childhood, when we used to go to the market. They used to cheat us when they bought our things because we didn't speak Spanish. Sometimes they'd say they paid for our beans or our plants in the market but when we got home and did our sums, the money didn't add up. So in this sense, they exploited us but, at the same time they discriminated against us because we were ignorant. . . . The root of our problems was the land. . . . We were exploited, [but] I felt that being an Indian was an extra dimension because I suffered discrimination as well as suffering exploitation. It was an additional reason for fighting with such enthusiasm. (Menchú 1984: 166-67)

21. When this same North American schoolteacher attempted to bring a Guaymí man with her to a Saturday night dance at the club reserved for management-level employees the division manager asked her Amerindian escort to leave.

22. Even university-based authors have reproduced racist stereotypes against the Guaymí in a naive manner. For example, in a research report on Bocas del Toro, geographer Leroy Gordon (1957) refers to the Guaymí as *cholos*, apparently under the impression that it was their correct name. Similarly, in a book on the benefits provided by the United Fruit Company to Latin America (commissioned by the National Planning Association), Stacy May and Gallo Plaza (1958:223) write: "Guaymí Indians . . . known locally as Cholos or Cricamolas . . . when they are sober are very stable workers."

23. A Costa Rican Hispanic worker told me that the Guaymí are born with their front teeth sharpened.

24. Virtually all the prostitutes I interviewed disliked their job and said they were forced to sell their bodies in order to support their children. Indeed most are single mothers heading large households. Several claimed they were putting sons and daughters through college in San José and that their children did not know about their occupation.

25. The cheaper brothel does not have showers and the prostitutes are obliged to bathe in the nearby Sixaola river where all the pesticides, fertilizers, and refuse from the plantation are discarded.

26. Anthropologists who have lived in Guaymí rural communities warned me that I might be confusing the standard Guaymí style of interpersonal interaction with an expression of hostility to outsiders (personal communication, Keith Bletzer).

27. This Amerindian organization was sponsored, at least in part, by the company to undercut the growing union movement in the mid-1960s.

28. The Guaymí authors of this tract were so saturated with U.S. propa-

ganda and with cowboys and Indians movies that they thought the official name for North American Amerindians was "red skin [*piel roja*]."

CHAPTER TEN. POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF GUAYMÍ CONJUGATED OPPRESSION

1. The company founded a management-controlled union in 1951 in Bocas in order to prevent the establishment of an independent organization.

2. The telegraph operator passed all sensitive telegrams to the United Fruit Company management; consequently I found this confidential telegram denouncing the transnational's union-busting practices in the company's historical archives.

3. Ironically many of these fired Amerindians were probably able to reincorporate themselves into the company's labor force by taking advantage of management's ethnocentrism: "all Indians look alike." I spoke with several elderly Guaymí labor organizers who claimed that, after being fired, they merely returned to the plantation a few weeks later pretending they were illiterate, monolingual, and "fresh from the mountains."

4. The best written account of Guaymí participation in the 1960 strike in Bocas can be found in Cabarrús 1979: 83-84.

5. Ironically, when I stayed overnight on the Panamanian side of the division during my fieldwork, I used to sleep in the same house where Schuverer had formerly lived. It was located in the company's elite White Zone (*zona blanca*), accessible only to high administrative officials. Apparently to the terror of his neighbors, Schuverer delivered charismatic harangues to several hundred angry machete-wielding Guaymí laborers from the porch of this house.

6. Many of these workers were subsequently reinstated. According to the author of one of the few written accounts of the strike, in the three months following the initial labor stoppage, the company fired 800 workers permanently (Pereira 1974: 96). I was unable to locate any statistics on the subject in the company files.

7. Massive labor reductions and technological change is a typical response by banana transnationals to strikes and to union-organizing drives. For example, in Honduras during the 1954 strike, the United Fruit Company subsidiary there fired 40 percent of its labor force—approximately 10,000 people. By 1955, because of technological changes in production initiated subsequent to the strike, the number of laborers employed in the banana industry in Honduras dropped from 35,000 to 27,500 (Posas 1981: 113).

8. In the Armuelles Division where the strike lasted until January 1961, according to Young (1978: 51), the number of Guaymí employed by the company dropped from 2,000 to 300.

9. In the Armuelles Division, the company never hired back the Guaymí in large numbers, perhaps because the Guaymí in Armuelles were more militant than those in Bocas. Even those living in the surrounding mountains have been exposed to political struggles to protect their lands. Near Armuelles, there is no

"virgin" mountainous region comparable to the Cricamola River basin southwest of Bocas where the company can still recruit young Amerindian men with no previous experience with the outside world. In Armuelles, furthermore, the violence and the repression of the strike were more severe. Government troops fired on demonstrators and killed Dionisio Rocha, a Guaymí worker (Palacios et al. 1974: 20). A newspaper, perhaps exaggerating the level of violence to justify the killing of the worker, reported:

There were barricades on the streets; traffic was at a standstill; Holcombe (the manager) and at least twelve other company officials were besieged in their offices; strikers brandished bars, clubs, ropes, and knives; civilians were searched and "arrested" whenever they were unable to give the strikers' password: check points were set up by the strikers at every kilometer of the railway; and there were open threats of setting fire to the company's gasoline and diesel oil storage tanks. . . . The Strike headquarters had notified the National Guard in Puerto Armuelles that it would have to request in writing any transportation it required. (*Star & Herald*, Panama, Nov. 23, 1960: 1)

10. The best account of the disintegration of the strike movement is provided, once again, by Cabarrús (1979: 83-86).

11. In the 1961 wharf strike, the company managed to involve the National Guard and the highest levels of government in its schemes to foment internal divisions within the labor movement. In fact, the division manager subsequently thanked the president of Panama for the intervention of the security forces: "In the name of the Chiriquí Land Company I would like to express to you our gratitude for the intervention of the National Executive Organ and the conduct of the National Guard in the recent strike conflict. . . . Through his concentrated diligence, Major Manuel Hurtado was able to convince the indian [sic] leaders that work should be resumed on the dock" (BDA: Cantrell to Chiari, Jan. 13, 1961).

12. Cabarrús records an interview with a militant Guaymí union leader who denounces Schuverer for having abandoned the people of Bocas after the elections: "Once he was in the Assembly—Goodbye Bocas del Toro! He came back four years later. The workers greeted him with rocks in their hands wanting to hit him" (1979: 84).

13. One legacy of this "nationalist" tendency within the Mamachí movement is the Guaymí *comarca* movement. Unfortunately, space constraints prevent me from addressing two major political movements among the Guaymí not directly related to the plantation context: the struggle against the establishment of the Cerro Colorado copper mine, and the demand for legal recognition of a politically autonomous land reserve (*la comarca*) in Guaymí territory. The best accounts of the *comarca* movement can be found in the monthly reports on the subject in the Panamanian journal *Diálogo Social*. Good documentation on the implications of the Cerro Colorado mine is contained in Gjording 1981; see also Young and Bort 1979; Bort 1983; "Guaymí of Panama" 1982.

14. The Miskitu conflict in Nicaragua is another example of a radical Amer-

indian political mobilization with a millenarian, Manichean dimension (Bourgois 1986).

15. Cabarrús (1979:85-88) provides an account of the 1975 union elections in which he details the ethnic composition of the leadership of the three slates. The winning slate included a Hispanic, several Guaymí (from both Chiriquí and Bocas provinces), and a Kuna. The composition of the other two slates was one exclusively Guaymí and one exclusively Hispanic.

16. Once again, because the percentage of Guaymí union voters was determined by counting only those workers whose identity cards indicated that they were born on the Reservation, the actual percentage of Amerindian voters is probably higher as many Guaymí have altered their identity cards so as not to appear to be "fresh from the mountains."

17. Another notable exception to the Guaymí pattern of voting for the promanagement union slate is the support for the militant union movement among the Guaymí working on the five independently owned farms and the state-run farms (COBANA). During my fieldwork, the union representing the workers on the COBANA and the privately owned farms was headed by a Guaymí from the Province of Chiriquí who was militantly antimanagement. Significantly, however, in late 1983 I overheard a Guaymí labor leader, on salary from the transnational, preparing plans to revitalize the promanagement slate on the COBANA and the privately owned farms by building on Guaymí support for a more Amerindian-oriented slate.

18. Unfortunately I was unable to collect data on the political tendencies of the Coastal Guaymí plantation workers, but I would posit that on the whole they were more receptive to the militant union slate.

CHAPTER ELEVEN. KUNA BANANA WORKERS: "TRADITION" AND MONOPOLY CAPITAL

1. In the anthropological literature Kuna is usually spelled with a "C." I prefer the "K" orthography, however, since that is what the Amerindians themselves most frequently use.

2. The isolation of San Blas is not so extreme as that of Bocas del Toro. Approximately one-fourth of the Kuna communities are connected by daily air service by commercial carrier (personal communication, William Durham).

3. Travel regulations in San Blas are not uniformly enforced; they vary depending on the islands and the individuals involved. On the more traditional islands there is a Kuna "policeman [*suaribedi*]" who issues "passports" and inspects the papers of travelers at the airports to ensure compliance.

4. Information on Kuna political structure was obtained from interviews with Kuna leaders on the plantation, as well as from Costello 1983; Falla 1978; Holloman 1969, 1975; Howe 1986; Moore 1984; Sanchez 1975; Sherzer 1983; and personal communications with William Durham and James Howe. Because the Kuna system has been so dynamic and adaptable, descriptions of Kuna po-

litical organization vary, depending upon the historical period and the community being referred to.

5. Of the fifty-two community-level official Kuna delegates to the 1983 Kuna General Congress at least a half dozen represented Kuna working outside of San Blas: one for Bocas del Toro, two for the Union of Kuna Workers on the Atlantic and Pacific coasts of the Canal Zone, and one representing the hotel workers on Contadora Island. Significantly, no representatives from any of the other Amerindian peoples of Panama were invited to the 1983 Kuna General Congress.

6. Today the Kuna spell Olotebilibiquiña's name Olotebilibikina. A more accurate spelling might be Olotepilikinya (personal communication, James Howe, Dec. 29, 1986). To avoid confusion, however, I will use the orthography found on the *cacique's* letterhead: Olotebilibiquiña.

7. The U.S. consul had had previous experience with neophyte Kuna workers because of their presence as service sector employees on U.S. military bases around the Canal Zone beginning in World War II.

8. There were actually a few complaints over Kuna labor productivity. Because of their small stature, they were not able to perform the heavier tasks on the plantation such as loading bananas: "These men are all small, not too strong physically and inherently opposed to hard work. . . . The cholos, while not refusing to handle the fruit, 'burned out' or got too tired to continue" (BDA: Munch to Moore, Aug. 2, 1954).

9. According to a company report from the mid-1950s, one-third of the Kuna workers were employed in railroad maintenance, half on the banana rehabilitation projects, and the remainder either in cacao, or in the sawmill (BDA: Rivera to Munch, Dec. 21, 1956).

10. Those Kuna who still worked in the fields at the time of my fieldwork were usually older men who had developed speed as baggers in the 1960s. Since bagging is paid on a piecework basis, it was worth their while to remain in this otherwise unpleasant field task.

11. The Kuna woman earning over \$500 (in U.S. money) per month had had an exceptional life history. As a child, she had taught herself how to read and write by sitting outside the open door of her island community's all-male primary school. Her parents then sent her to Panama City to further her education where she won a scholarship to study in the United States. Toward the end of my fieldwork she was fired.

12. The most prestigious job held by any Kuna in the province was that of regional head of the National Office of Investigations (*Dirección de Investigación Nacional*), roughly equivalent to being the director of a regional office of the Federal Bureau of Investigation in the United States.

13. A Kuna society like Guaymí society does not permit women to work for the company.

14. It is interesting to contrast the success of the Kuna in adapting their traditional artisanal production of *molas* to the cash economy versus the failure of the Guaymí to promote the sale of their *chákaras*, which are ornately hand-woven bags with a potentially high market value for tourists.

15. The Kuna reputation for courtesy and cleanliness explains why they were favored for service positions that required prolonged, close contact with non-Amerindians. Their background was impoverished enough for them to be "humble and hard working," but they were not so excessively dislocated and ideologically oppressed as to behave erratically like the Guaymí. Consequently, their relations with non-Amerindians were not tense, awkward, or potentially explosive. A Kuna woman explained: "We are not proud. We'll happily do any kind of job. And we're clean." Of course all this is relative; in the Darien employers have been known to prefer the Choco Amerindians to the Kuna, claiming the Kuna were too argumentative and proud (personal communication, James Howe, Dec. 29, 1986).

16. The agricultural development project of Udirbi (since renamed Pemasky) is a good example of the kind of investment made by UTRAKUNA. The project was initiated in 1976 with money raised jointly by the Kuna working in Bocas del Toro and on the Canal Zone in the U.S. Army forts (Unión de Trabajadores Kuna n.d.: n.p.). Its goal was to develop 2,000 hectares of land along the perimeter of the *comarca* where the government planned to build an access road from Colón. The Kuna feared that this new road would result in an influx of land-hungry, non-Amerindian peasants. Project Udirbi does not respond to strictly capitalist logic; after five years there had still been no return on the initial investment. Indeed the rationale for the project had nothing to do with profits; its purpose was to protect Amerindian land rights (*ibid.*). The sums of money involved have been substantial: in 1979 alone, total investments were estimated at \$61,563.50 (*ibid.*).

17. In 1983, one of the main *caciques* of San Blas made headlines in the Panamanian press when he paid a courtesy visit to Communist party headquarters in Panama in recognition of the party's work in the *comarca*.

18. Tony Smith received only 6 votes out of the 274 cast in the UTRAKUNA elections.

19. The Kuna representative who ordered his people to join the Sixaola strike was summarily fired by the company, and all the Kuna strikers were deported to San Blas.

CHAPTER TWELVE. HISPANICS IN THE LABOR FORCE

1. "From the interior them bring Spaniards come here. The Spaniards them they broke up the banana. Too big, and one man can't carry. All them 14 hand and 16 hand bananas; them broke them in two. Two men one bunch. And when the banana big, one long bunch, two of them hold it. And hold it and cut it [laughs]; this one carries piece; the other one carries piece. The foreman them says no, no, no, no, no. Them says '*muy pesado* [very heavy]' [laughs] '*pesa mucho* [it weighs a lot].' They work but they don't know the work."

2. Already by the 1920s, in Guanacaste, over a dozen landlords possessed a minimum of 10,000 hectares each (Edelman 1985:61).

3. Sixaola remains a haven for outlaws and ex-offenders even today. At the

time of my fieldwork, many of the Sixaola District workers had criminal records. The Sixaola farms have a more lenient security clearance than other plantations in Costa Rica. Many of the workers are fleeing child support suits since the Social Welfare Institute (in charge of enforcing the alimony and child support laws in Costa Rica) did not include Sixaola in its registry in 1984.

4. The Sixaola cacao orchards following World War II were in particularly bad condition, having become seriously overgrown in the early 1940s when most able-bodied laborers were shifted into better paid abacá farm work. The black population who remained in the Sixaola District through World War II refused to "chop bush" for the wages the company was paying. I was told that poisonous snakes (especially the redoubted *terciopelo*) abounded in the shaded, cool, humid undergrowth of the company's overgrown cacao orchards.

5. Labor for the coffee harvest is obtained locally in the Central Highlands where the orchards are concentrated. Since coffee picking is remunerated on a piece-rate basis, skilled, experienced pickers can earn well above the minimum wage. Often all the members of a family, including young children, participate in the harvest.

6. All banana companies need a certain minimal percentage (between 50 and 75 percent) of stable, experienced workers to perform the tasks that require skill (packing, selecting, pruning, etc.). The remaining 25 to 50 percent of the labor force is systematically discharged with a few carefully chosen exceptions every three months. The Bocas Division was just beginning to reach this level of labor stability in 1983, toward the end of my fieldwork period.

7. By popular vote in 1828, the various subregions of Guanacaste seceded from Nicaragua and became part of Costa Rica (Edelman 1985: chap. 2, n. 8).

8. By North American standards a large proportion of Guanacastecans would be considered "black." In fact, according to a newspaper report, a random survey of blood types in Guanacaste revealed that the incidence of a deformed B chain hemoglobin in the local population was 7 percent compared to 9 percent among Africans and 2.54 percent for the rest of Costa Rica (*La Nación*, April 24, 1978).

9. Some Guanacastecans and Nicaraguans managed to save money during their periods of wage labor on the banana plantations. I spoke with several small grocery store owners in remote villages in Guanacaste and Nicaragua who had raised the capital for their businesses through plantation wage work.

10. I met several descendants of Salvadoran immigrant workers who claimed that their fathers had been contracted by the company via a special negotiation with General Maximiliano Hernandez Martinez. I was told that, during World War II, a group of 500 Salvadoran men under the age of thirty were shipped out of the Salvadoran port of Acajutla following a rigorous medical exam. I was unable, however, to find any direct reference to the recruitment of Salvadorans in the company's archives. These Salvadorans were probably recruited by the U.S. Army for work on the Panama Canal and then reassigned to the abacá project in Bocas del Toro.

11. In 1947 various permits to import smaller numbers of Central Americans were obtained from the Panamanian government. In 1949, an agreement

was signed for the importation of "500 laborers and their families for agricultural work in the province of Bocas del Toro" (BDA: Mais to Diebold, Nov. 1949). Again in 1951, permission was granted for an additional "thousand laborers from Honduras and/or Nicaragua to Almirante" (BDA: Moore to Myrick, Sept. 4, 1951).

12. Many Guatemalans, Salvadorans, and Nicaraguans signed onto the ship as Hondurans in order to qualify for recruitment according to the quota established by the company's labor contract with the Panamanian and Honduran governments.

13. Many Guanacastecans also reached the Sixaola District on foot during this period in equally desperate economic straits.

14. The company doctors screened the workers before approving their passage into Panama. In much the same way as the West Indian immigrants had been screened medically at the turn of the century before being recruited for work on the Panama Canal (see chapter 5), the Nicaraguans and Hondurans who were introduced into the Bocas Division in the late 1940s were subjected to medical exams. For example: "One of the twelve laborers examined in Sixaola . . . was rejected because of hernia" (BDA: Engler to Diebold, March 22, 1947). "One of the five laborers arrived in Sixaola . . . was rejected because of tertiary syphilis; another was treated for gonorrhoe [*sic*] and approved; the others were accepted" (BDA: Engler to Diebold, March 6, 1947).

The poor health conditions of the Nicaraguan immigrants, especially the prevalence of malaria and hernias in the doctor's reports, testifies to the rigors faced by Nicaraguan agricultural laborers during this period.

15. Tomás Borge, one of the founders of the Sandinista National Liberation Front in Nicaragua, jokingly refers to "the Costa Rican banana zone—a North American territory inhabited by Nicaraguans and where can be found a few Costa Ricans" (1980:29).

CHAPTER THIRTEEN. HISPANIC POLITICAL MOBILIZATION AND LABOR CONTROL

1. Many workers and management officials claimed that Salvadorans are even better laborers than Nicaraguans. The number of Salvadorans in the Bocas Division labor force, however, has never been large enough to warrant a systematic discussion of them as an ethnic group. It is only logical, however, that Salvadorans should make excellent day laborers, given the widespread misery in their country and its prolonged history of political violence and repression. Significantly, the Salvadorans I interviewed were generally extremely polite and cautious; they never publicly criticized the company or even their foremen. When asked too many questions, they usually answered noncommittally and bid leave at the first possibility.

2. The Bribri Reservation may be one of the few places in the world where Amerindians can be heard praising the diligent work habits of their Hispanic (white) employees in a patronizing tone. In an ironic illustration of the "fickle-

ness of ethnicity," a landless immigrant from Nicaragua who was employed full time by a Bribri farmer confided in me that he too was probably a "pure-blooded Indian" but that the people in his community (Ometepe Island in the Province of Rivas) had lost their indigenous language and customs.

3. No sharp differentiation is drawn in Bocas between Guanacastecans and Nicaraguans; the two groups are generally lumped together by management and characterized as the best workers. When pressed for details, however, company officials admit a difference between Nicaraguans and Guanacastecans but a subtle one: "The Guanacastecan is like the Nica; he works hard, at least at first. His problem is that he gets infected by communism and laziness too easily."

4. Ironically Guanacastecans in their home communities complain that Nicaraguan immigrants deflate their local wage structure. For example, Edelman notes that haciendas in Guanacaste close to the Nicaragua border have distinctly more rigorous working conditions than those in the rest of the province: "The proximity of Nicaragua and the presence of a small but continual flow of Nicaraguan migrants accustomed to working under such terms made this [more strenuous] labor regime feasible in the border area" (1985:42).

5. In mid-1983, Nicaraguan banana workers were earning only thirty-two *cordobas* for five hours' work (U.S. \$1.15 at the official exchange rate or U.S. \$0.40 at the black market rate), their housing was marginal, and their access to running water infrequent. Many young children on the plantation I visited had distended bellies, a virtually nonexistent sight on the Costa Rican and Panamanian banana plantations. Hygiene was so poor that during the week I spent on the Nicaraguan plantation I contracted parasites, whereas during the nine months I lived in the workers' barracks in the Sixaola District on the Costa Rican side of the Bocas Division I stayed relatively healthy. Finally, most of the Nicaraguan banana workers go to the fields in barefeet. In the Bocas Division, with the exception of the most recently arrived Guaymí workers, everyone was able to afford at least a pair of rubber boots. Significantly, workers assured me that conditions had been even worse prior to the Sandinista revolution.

6. In the late 1970s, the company obtained government permission to import 300 Guaymí Amerindians into the Sixaola District. In fact, however, far larger numbers were imported (MLF: Castañeda to Ministry of Labor, Dec. 6, 1979; Stancori to Góméz, Dec. 26, 1979). The transnational's subcontractor in Sixaola arranged for the company to change dollars for the Ministry of Labor inspectors at below the market rate in order to prevent an investigation into these illegal immigration practices: "I had those guys in my pocket; they were all my good friends." In the company files I found reference to a low-level immigration official being granted a soft job in return for his past cooperation in letting Guaymí cross the Sixaola Bridge into Costa Rica (SDF: Sixaola District Labor Relations Office to Changuinola headquarters, July 7, 1981). The division manager told me that Costa Rican officials had "winked" at the enforcement of the quotas on foreign employees in the Sixaola District during the late 1970s.

7. The principal founders of the Sixaola Cacao Workers' Union in 1954 were

former banana workers from the company's Pacific Coast divisions in Puntarenas Province. They had been blacklisted by the transnational in the Pacific, but managed to find employment in Sixaola. During this period the Sixaola District was so marginal that the company did not even bother to consult its blacklist before hiring new workers. The district developed a reputation in the 1950s (and even still in the 1980s during my fieldwork) as "such an ugly place to work, that they'll even hire reds [*tan feo que enganchan rojos*]."

8. According to one participant, "That wasn't a strike. It was a war on the workers. Three hundred *guardias* came with their backpacks, grenades, masks, and guns. It would be better to call it a stampede [*caballada*] against the workers. They chased after us like animals. I never had schooling so I just don't have the words to explain how horrible it was." Significantly, even the superintendent of agriculture and the head of labor relations admitted to me that the Rural Guard had "acted roughly [*metieron mano dura*]" against the strikers.

9. The United Fruit Company has a special arrangement with the Costa Rican Ministry of Security whereby local subsidiaries pay for the upkeep and the transport of security forces when they are deployed to protect strikebreakers. The superintendent of the Sixaola District told me that every morning he and the colonel in charge of the Rural Guardsmen would discuss strategy for the coming day.

10. According to eyewitness accounts, just before being shot, Morales picked up his daughter to protect her. The same bullet that killed him wounded her in the knee. For the numerous press accounts of the strike see *La Libertad*, Jan. 22–28, 1982:3; Feb. 12–18, 1982:5; Feb. 19–25, 1982:1; Feb. 26–March 4, 1982; *La Nación*, Jan. 21, 1982:8, Jan. 22, 1982:6; and *La Prensa Libre*, Feb. 2, 1982:4; Feb. 10, 1982:4; Feb. 11, 1982:9; Feb. 15, 1982:17. A rumor was circulating at the time of my fieldwork that several additional workers (up to 25 by some accounts) had been killed by the Rural Guard. This rumor was never confirmed publicly, although cadavers were uncovered in drainage ditches and several workers allegedly disappeared.

11. The director of the jail placed the strikers in the cell for common criminals and announced that the newly arrived prisoners were communists with whom the inmates could have free reign. The criminals thereupon beat up the strikers, raping some of them, and stole all their possessions. One imprisoned striker (a Nicaraguan immigrant) told me how he had to walk all the way back to the plantation in barefeet and shirtless, having lost everything in the Limón jail.

12. Ironically many of the former militant strikers underwent an ideological transformation once they obtained land as squatters. Halfway through my fieldwork the governor of Limón announced that the usufruct land rights of the squatters would be respected in the Sixaola Valley. Subsequently local membership in the FENAC, the most militant peasant union, plummeted. According to a FENAC organizer this is a general pattern with land takeovers. As soon as the state ceases repressing them, the newly constituted small property owners drop out of the union and sometimes even become anticommunist. A drunk squatter who was celebrating the governor's announcement told me, "Now that we got

the land we can get rid of the communists. Reds are good for getting you the land 'cause they fight. But now it's better if they leave 'cause they just attract problems."

13. The Costa Rican anthropologist Jacobo Schifter (1982: 194-95) has noted that the notion of a democratic status quo is so deeply engrained in Costa Rican consciousness that historians and sociologists have systematically de-emphasized the authoritarian periods of Costa Rican history in favor of the myth of a continuous, peaceful democracy.

14. A good example of the "human face of repression" in Costa Rica is the case of a squatter woman who screamed that she was pregnant and miscarrying just as the Rural Guard was about to evict her from her hut on company land. The Rural Guardsmen immediately called an ambulance from Limón four hours away by dirt road. When the ambulance finally arrived, the woman admitted that she was not even pregnant.

The contradictory nature of the Costa Rican model of repression-with-reform is further illustrated by the case of a union leader who was fired by the transnational and subsequently jailed and beaten by the security forces for leading a strike in 1982. When I met him six months later he had been unable to find another job because of blacklisting, and he, his wife, and four children were subsisting on the food allowance provided by the Ministry of Social Welfare to the family members of the unemployed.

15. During my fieldwork there were a series of drug-related murders in the squatter settlements surrounding the plantation. Several Costa Rican workers told me they had quit their jobs and were leaving because "too many Nicaraguans around here are killing people."

16. Most of the Communist party's leadership positions in Bocas were held by Chiricanos. Similarly, the bulk of the independent union leadership was also Chiricano. At the same time, however, a disproportionate number of the middle- and low-level management positions on the plantation were held by Chiricanos.

17. I was able to find specific reference in the company files to cases of sabotage leading to large-scale deportations during the early 1950s (Munch to Moore, July 28, 1953). In fact, there are even suggestions of a twinge of conscience in an internal report from the division manager to headquarters after arrangements were made with government immigration officials to deport forty-eight striking Hondurans accused of chopping down banana plants at night: "I regret any injustices which may have been done to . . . the laborers . . . [but] I am highly pleased that we were able to prevail upon local authorities to act as they did" (BDA: Munch to Moore, July 28, 1953).

18. For example, the second hand man of Fallas, the leader of the 1934 strike, was a Nicaraguan nicknamed "Shot Through" (*Tirases*) because he had been repeatedly pierced by bullets from U.S. machine guns, while an officer in General Sandino's army.

19. The country-specific publications of Americas Watch and Amnesty International are useful for documenting the extent of political violence and government repression in Central America in recent years.

20. Most Salvadoran emigrants work in the transnational's Honduran sub-

sidiaries in Tela and La Ceiba. In 1934, out of 4,928 laborers on the Tela Railroad Company plantations in Honduras, 1,072 were Salvadorans (Posas 1981: 46).

21. The United Nations officials terminated the negotiations when they visited Sixaola and saw the unsatisfactory living and working conditions. They were also concerned about the company's contractor for the Sixaola project who had a reputation for illegal activity and poor labor relations (see chapter 9).

22. According to a Costa Rican Ministry of Labor official, in December 1983, many anti-Sandinista fighters operating out of Costa Rica were working temporarily as banana workers on the Standard Fruit Company and Del Monte plantations in the North in between offensives.

23. By the 1960s virtually all the second- and third-generation West Indian immigrants had obtained Panamanian citizenship.

24. For a creative discussion of the "North Americanization" of Latin American United Fruit Company officials see Camacho (1982).

CHAPTER FOURTEEN. CONCLUSION: HOW IMPORTANT IS ETHNICITY?

1. According to the Roman Catholic bishop of Bocas del Toro, the transnational fired one of his Guaymí parishioners for union activity and then arranged for him to be fired, once again, after he obtained a job with the only other major employer in the province in Chiriquí Grande.

2. Conversely, one explanation for why the Guaymí were distinctly more militant than the rest of the labor force in the 1960s' strike was that they had land available to them in their home communities (Falla 1979). According to this argument, their marginal integration into the cash economy rendered them less susceptible to the threat of being fired and blacklisted (*ibid.*). The subsistence economy served as an emergency alternative should they be fired and forced out of the cash economy because of blacklisting.

3. The serious labor situation of the transnational's subsidiary in Honduras prompted the company to accelerate the transfer of black laborers to Honduras illegally, by smuggling them into the country at night. The files contain a humorous set of telegrams in code in which "birds" stands for blacks: "If I can arrange for birds trip Bocas to Puerto Castilla [Honduras], am considering putting De Leon [a labor contractor] in charge of collecting birds" (BDA: cited in Chittenden to Blair, Aug. 4, 1922). Scribbled on the back of this letter was a note of explanation, "The big idea would be to let De Leon appear to be doing this for his own account." This smuggling heist ultimately aborted when one of the men involved in the operation "spilled all the beans in every saloon in town" (*ibid.*). A code telegram was sent to the manager of the Trujillo Railroad Company: "Loose talk . . . makes bird traffic absolutely dangerous for the present. Am positive consequences would be serious for you and embarrassing to me" (*ibid.*).

4. Other transnationals operating in the region also paid careful attention to the previous employment trajectory of their prospective laborers. For example,

in the early 1900s labor recruiters for the Panama Canal Company rejected workers who had formerly worked on the canal (Newton 1983: 15).

5. See also Cabarrús's (1979: 85–91) discussion of the 1975 union elections in Bocas.

6. The horror of the Nazi concentration camps offers a more extreme metaphor than that of the pressure cooker for conceptualizing how a plantation-style division of labor Balkanizes a labor force. The Nazis recruited foremen and low-level administrators from among the concentration camp inmates. Furthermore, access to a preferential work detail determined one's chances of daily survival. Certain jobs provided surreptitious access to supplementary rations such as the "Canada" and "*Sonderkommando*" details which performed the logistical tasks directly involved in the physical extermination of the millions of humans killed in the Holocaust (cf. Borowski 1967; Muller 1979, Bettelheim 1960). The dramatic differences in survival chances depending upon one's location in the concentration camp division of labor resulted in what some Holocaust survivors have referred to as an "inner warfare among prisoners for survival and positions of power" (Bettelheim 1960: 187). Like the high echelons of management in the banana transnational, the Nazi administrators could rely on the hierarchy created within the division of labor to augment social control and increase "productive" efficiency: "Having an in with some member of the prisoner aristocracy became the only way a prisoner could save his life. . . . Just to find and keep a good labor command was always a matter of life and death, and so was getting a better food ration. . . . The working of the prisoner hierarchy proved that a handful of SS men could actually rule tens of thousands of hostile prisoners, could even induce prisoners to work and control others for them without ever becoming dangerous" (ibid.: 179–80).

7. For example, the French consul in Costa Rica complained to his superiors in 1904: "With elements of penetration such as the United Fruit Company and the Panama Canal Company, the United States has hereby, as of now, become the masters of the entire Atlantic Coast of Central America. The complete absorption of this part of the world is just a question of days barring a European intervention" (FAA: Report by Emile Joré, French consul in San José, March 27, 1904: 15, vol. 1; courtesy of the research notes of Dr. Isabel Wing-Ching, University of Costa Rica).

8. Historically, racism has overpowered the company's economic interests on several occasions. For example, the decrees excluding the Chinese from Costa Rica and Panama in the late 1800s prevented the transnational from being able to take advantage of an extremely inexpensive labor force.

Bibliography

ARCHIVAL ABBREVIATIONS

- ANCH: National Archives of the Costa Rican Congress, *Serie Historia*.
- BCO: Archives of the British Colonial Office. (Courtesy of the Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers Project.)
- BDA: Historical archives of the Bocas Del Toro Division, United Fruit Company, Panama. Unfortunately these "archives" consist of approximately fifty mildewed, cardboard boxes stored in a damp warehouse. Consequently, many files are incomplete and damaged.
- BDF: Operational files of the Bocas del Toro Division, Chiriqui Land Company, Panama.
- BFO: Archives of the British Foreign Office. (Courtesy of the Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers Project.)
- FAA: Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Nouvelle Série*, Quai d'Orsay, Paris, France. (Courtesy of Dr. Isabel Wing-Ching, University of Costa Rica.)
- FENAC F.: Files of the National Peasant Federation, Limón, Costa Rica.
- IDALF: Files of the Legal Division of the Institute for Agrarian Development, San José, Costa Rica.
- ITCO M.F.: Files of the Institute of Land and Colonization, Margarita de Talamanca, Costa Rica. The Margarita de Talamanca office was abandoned at the

- time of my fieldwork and the files lay strewn in disarray on the floor. In early 1983, PAIS tore down the office and burned the remaining files.
- MGPF: Files of the Marcus Garvey and Universal Negro Improvement Association Papers Project, African Studies Center, University of California, Los Angeles.
- MLF: Files of the Ministry of Labor, San José, Costa Rica.
- PCCF: Files of the Panama Canal Commission.
- SDF: Files of the Sixaola District, Bocas del Toro Division, Chiriqui Land Company, Costa Rica.
- UPEB: Documentation Center of the Union of Banana Producing Nations, Panama.

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- Gronbladt, E. R.: Manager, Bocas Division, subsequently UFCO representative, San José; 1960s.
- Hamer, R. H.: Manager of Pacific Coast Divisions, UFCO, Costa Rica (*Compañía Bananera de Costa Rica*) and subsequently responsible for Southern Central American Operations; 1940s and 1950s.
- Heck: Code name for UFCO labor recruiting agent, Bocas Division; 1949.
- Holcombe: Manager, Armuelles Division; 1950s-60s.
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Index

- Abacá, 19, 93, 114, 123, 187, 188, 189,
210, 218, 221, 233, 245 nn.13, 14,
271 n.10
- Abangares, 254 n.12
- African palm, 22, 248–49 n.10
- AIFLD, 9–10, 156, 242
- Almirante, port of, 5, 7, 15, 24, 62, 63,
81, 83, 86, 87, 92, 99, 102, 104, 118,
168, 247 n.4, 254 n.16
- American Banana Company, 23
- Amubri, 28
- Anti-communism, 11, 13, 104, 106, 117,
119, 134, 147, 149, 152, 176, 177, 204,
206, 221, 242, 251 n.13, 260 n.18,
273 n.3, 274–75 n.12
- Anti-semitism, 206, 245 n.11, 277 n.6
- Arbenz, Jacobo, 17, 244 n.8
- Arias, Arnulfo, 91, 153–54, 258 n.8
- Armuelles Division, 7, 22, 112, 122, 127,
138, 145, 147, 149, 189, 190, 191, 199,
204, 226, 262 n.7, 264 n.13, 266–
67 nn.8, 9
- Artisans and Labourers Union, 54, 62, 71
- Babbage, Charles, 223–24
- Balseria*, 139–40
- Barbadians. *See* Barbados
- Barbados, 49, 50, 61, 62, 64, 72, 216
- Bastimentos Island, 7
- Beleño, Joaquín, 138
- Belize, 46, 62, 260 n.15
- Bettel, Mr., 57, 58, 60
- Black, Ely, 17
- Blacks, 123–24, 225, 271 n.8; author's re-
lationship to, xiii, 256 n.8, 259 n.10; as
Bribri, 40, 93, 249 n.12; citizenship of,
61, 73, 90–95, 154, 220, 258 n.7,
276 n.23; in class/ethnic hierarchy, 66,
73–78, 79, 80–84, 86–88, 95–96,
99–100, 109–10, 184, 189, 219,
257 nn.13, 14, 16, 258 n.1, 271 n.4; di-
aspora of, 45–46, 49; discrimination
against, xi, 45, 51, 61, 84–97, 109–10,
217, 218, 219, 220–21, 251 n.9,
253 n.6, 254 nn.12, 15, 257 n.18,
258 nn.3, 6, 276 n.3; emigration of, 66,
71, 78–81, 82, 102, 256 n.10; and inter-

Blacks (*continued*)

nalized racism, 93, 95-99, 103, 259n.9, 260n.17; North American, 48, 51, 62, 64-65, 93, 94, 259n.10; number of, 79, 257n.16, 258n.6; as peasants, 66-70, 72-73, 76-78, 79, 80-82, 83, 93, 102-4, 108, 221, 227, 260-61n.19; political orientation of, 51-52, 60, 73, 92-95, 98-109, 200, 215, 220-23, 258n.8, 260n.16; as privileged workers, 66, 68, 73-84, 95, 102-4, 221, 223, 226; racism against Hispanics, 76, 78, 84, 94, 103, 104, 109-10, 182, 221, 256n.9; as squatters, 26, 70, 72-73, 77, 93, 186; upward mobility of, 53, 66-84, 102, 109-10, 219, 255n.1, 257nn.13, 15; and U.S./Anglo-Saxons, 45, 51-52, 76, 79, 93-97, 100, 102-5, 220-21, 259n.10, 260n.17. *See also* Labor conflicts, early history of; United States, immigration to; *and under* West Indians

Bletzer, Keith, 115

Bocas del Toro Division, ix-x, 3-8, 10, 14, 18-23, 82-83, 95, 239n.4; abandonment of, 7-8, 24, 32-33, 75, 114; acreage planted, 4, 7-8, 19, 25; archives, xiii, xiv; early history of, 7, 15-16, 19, 46-47, 49-50, 54-58, 60-61, 63-65, 67, 69, 74-75, 86, 93, 97-101, 106, 188, 254n.16; early working conditions at, 46-47, 50, 253n.7; exports from, 4, 8, 19, 25, 33, 69, 233; historical production fluctuations, 7, 19, 124, 233; infrastructure, 3-5, 22-23, 47, 125-26, 132-33, 197-98, 247n.4; land acquisition, 15-16, 24-26, 28-32, 243-44nn.2, 3, 247n.2; location of, ix, 23, 230, 231; number of workers in, x, 19, 111, 129, 234-37, 245-46n.14, 263n.7 (*see also* Guaymí, number of workers; Hispanics, number of workers); White Zone, 4, 87, 266n.5; withholding benefits payments, 69-72, 92, 122-23, 126-27, 131, 134, 167, 168, 185. *See also* Production process, instability of banana; *and under* Labor conflicts; Labor movement; Production process; Sixaola; Talamanca; United Fruit Company

Bocas del Toro province, 15, 23, 27, 45, 46, 67-68, 78-82, 85-88, 92, 95, 111, 112, 215. *See also under* Bocas del Toro Division

Bocas Island, 63, 86, 105, 115, 261-62n.6

Bogotá Amerindians, 111

Boston, 85, 124, 247n.2

Boston Fruit Company, 14

Bozzoli de Willc, Maria Eugenia, 249n.14

Bribri, 248n.6; in class/ethnic hierarchy, 39-41, 251n.9, 272-73n.2; and Company employment, 34-36, 113, 158; discrimination against, 34, 38, 39-40, 251n.10; and Hispanics, 33, 39, 40, 41, 182-83, 195; and internalized racism, 39; King of, 30-32, 249n.13; land expropriation and struggles, 24-26, 28-35, 39-44, 73, 93, 112, 247n.5, 249n.11, 251n.13, 255n.4; Miskitu raids on, 27-28, 248n.8; and nationalism, 44; and outside economy, 26, 33, 34-35, 37-39, 113, 250n.2; as peasants, 37-39, 41, 44, 250n.6; Reservation, 31, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41-42, 250-51n.6; resistance tradition, 31, 32, 33; territory of, 24, 28, 249n.10, 250n.6; and wage labor, 34-38, 44, 113, 158; and West Indians, 26, 28-29, 32-33, 34-35, 249n.12, 250n.2; witchcraft, 32, 33, 43, 249n.14, 250n.1. *See also under* Talamanca District

Broadbell, Mr., 70-72

Cabarrús, Carlos Rafael, 116, 225,

266n.4, 267nn.10, 12, 268n.15, 277n.5

Cabécar Amerindians, 41, 113, 157-58,

248n.6, 249-50nn.1, 5, 250-51n.6

Cacao, 7-8, 68, 123, 188, 233, 249n.1;

and blacks, 66, 68, 75, 76-77, 78, 80, 81, 83, 93, 109, 250n.5; and Hispanics, 186, 189, 250n.5; and moniliasis, 81, 83; in Limón, 46; in Sixaola, 33, 67, 75, 87, 184, 199, 200, 255n.4, 271n.4; in Talamanca, 26, 29, 67, 41, 251n.11, 255n.4

Camacho, Carlos, 276n.24

Canal Zone. *See* Panama Canal

Cartago, 25, 197, 204

Castle and Cooke, 21, 242n.18, 244n.8

- Changuinola, 7, 28
 Chase, 67
 Chinese, 29, 47, 89, 252–53 n.3, 277 n.8
 Chiquita trademark, 4
 Chiricanos, 179, 192, 199, 205, 210; discrimination against, 191, 218; enter labor force, 191; political orientation of, 204, 214, 222–23
 Chiriquí Grande, 7, 276 n.1
 Chiriquí Lagoon, 27, 49, 63, 67, 69, 112, 247 n.4, 248 nn.8,9
 Chiriqui Land Company, 3, 4, 22, 240 n.1, 246–47 nn.19,20, 267 n.11
 Chiriquí province, 90, 111, 112, 113, 122, 147, 204, 261 n.4
 Chirripó Reservation, 113, 250 n.5
 Choco Amerindians, 111, 270 n.15
 Cincinnati, 122
 Class: definition of, xv; class fractions, xv, 103, 129–30, 222–23, 224, 226. *See also under* Ethnic discrimination; Ethnicity
 COBANA (National Banana Company), 4, 121, 170, 177, 192, 216, 236, 240 n.3, 268 n.17
 Coffee, 180, 252 n.2, 271 n.5
 Colman, Cimral, 162
 Colombia, 7, 11, 19, 241 n.13, 242 n.17, 246 n.15, 256 nn.9,10
 Colombians, 30, 203, 241 n.13, 256 n.9
 Colón, 46, 163, 166, 199
 Communism. *See under* Communist party
 Communist party, xii, 104, 107, 108–9, 142, 242 n.16, 245 n.9, 254 n.14, 260 n.18; and blacks, 59, 109; and Chiricanos, 204, 214, 275 n.16; Costa Rican, 40, 52, 59, 109, 206 (*see also* Labor conflicts, Limón strike of 1934); and Guaymí, xii, 119, 143, 153, 157, 194; and Hispanics, 157, 194, 200, 203, 214; and Kuna, 177, 270 n.17; in Talamanca, 40; and West Indians, 52. *See also under* Anti-Communism; Labor conflicts; Labor movement; Repression
 Conjugated oppression, 155, 219, 264–65 n.20; definition of, x–xi, 95, 120, 224; and Guaymí, 145, 148, 150, 153–55
 Conniff, Michael, 90
 Coroma, 31
 Cortés, León, 97
 Costa Rica, 3–8, 10–12, 14, 19, 20, 21, 22, 202–4, 272 n.15; Central Highlands, 39, 46, 58, 74, 89, 90, 108, 180–81, 183, 196, 197, 201, 202, 251 n.13, 253 n.6, 258 n.6, 271 n.5; Guanacaste, 182, 183, 186, 190, 194, 195–96; Rural Guard, 23, 43, 201, 251 n.13, 270 n.2, 271 n.7, 274 nn.8–10, 275 n.14. *See also under* Costa Rican government
 Costa Rican government, 4, 16–18, 20–21, 23, 30, 31, 42, 88, 99, 202–3, 246 n.16, 247 n.1, 247–48 n.5; immigration laws, 47, 79, 89–91, 94, 109, 273 n.6, 277 n.8 (*see also* Blacks, citizenship of); repression by, 55–56, 73, 200–204, 207, 242 n.17, 251 n.13, 253 n.11, 274 nn.8–11, 275 n.14. *See also* Costa Rica, Rural Guard
 Costa Ricans, 179, 194, 195, 226; attitudes toward Amerindians, 38, 251 n.8; attitudes toward blacks, 52, 66, 89, 103; in class/ethnic hierarchy, 184–85, 195, 197–98; enter labor force, 58, 74, 180–81, 201; political orientation, 29–30, 201–4, 275 nn.13,14; privileged, 68, 195; racism of, 76, 88, 89–90, 203, 206–7, 212, 221, 253 nn.4,6; refuse Company employment, 46–47, 132, 158, 180, 196–97, 275 n.15; strike participation, 53, 135, 200–201; as strike-breakers, 58, 200–201, 204; as whites, 39, 212, 254 n.13. *See also under* Guanacastecans; Hispanics
 Creoles, 61, 62, 64, 86
 Cricamola, 7, 28, 114, 115, 126–27, 267 n.9; Guaymí, 114–16, 125, 131, 134, 137, 218, 264 n.17, 265 n.22
 Cuba, 19, 45, 49, 244 n.8
 Cubans, 203
 Cusapin, 115
 Davis, Raymond, 47, 76, 255 n.18
 Del Monte, 21, 242 n.17, 244 n.5, 246 n.18, 276 n.22
 Dock work, 63–64, 168, 222, 267 n.11
 Dominica, 255 n.5
 Dominican Republic, 7, 19

- Ecuador, 7, 19
 Edelman, Marc, 182, 195–96, 273 n.4
 Ellis, Frank, 9
 El Salvador. *See* Salvadorans
 Estrella Valley, 55, 65, 70, 108, 221
 Ethnic discrimination, x–xii, xv, 51, 109, 140, 203, 206–7, 209, 212, 213, 218, 221, 225, 227, 253 nn.4,6, 264–65 n.20, 277 n.8; against Amerindians, 38, 171, 177, 251 n.8. *See also* Labor conflicts, ethnic divisions within; Labor movement, ethnic divisions within; *and under* Blacks; Bribri; Chiricanos; Guanacastecans; Guaymí; Hispanics; Nicaraguans; Whites
 Ethnicity, ix–x; definition of, x, xii, 160, 216, 223; relationship to class, x–xi, xiv–xv, 98–100, 120, 136, 145, 213–15, 219–27, 264–65 n.20. *See also* Conjugated oppression; *and under* Ethnic discrimination
 Europe, 55, 277 n.7. *See also* Europeans
 Europeans, 48, 51, 68, 88, 115, 136, 241 n.10. *See also* French; Great Britain; Gallegos; Spanish Colonialism
 Exploitability, 68, 120–21, 201, 215, 218, 261 n.19; of blacks, 68, 123–24; of Bribri, 34–37; of Guanacastecans, 196, 273 n.4; of Guaymí, x–xi, 113–14, 120–25, 128, 132, 135, 196; of Hispanics, 123–24, 135, 194–96; of Kuna, x–xi, 166–68, 174–76, 270 n.15; of Nicaraguans, xi, 132, 194–96, 219, 272–73 nn.1–4; of Salvadorans, 272 n.1; of West Indians, 48–51, 64–65, 120, 132, 194, 215, 222, 272 n.14
 Falla, Ricardo, 151
 Fallas, Carlos Luis, 24, 36, 59, 105, 183–84, 251 n.10, 256 n.10, 275 n.18
 Federation of Limón Workers, 60, 101
 FENAC (National Peasant Federation), 203, 251 n.13, 274–75 n.12
 Ferreto, Arnoldo, 203
 Fieldwork: dates of, ix, x; implications of author's ethnicity, xii–xiv, 13, 256 n.8, 259 n.10, 261 n.5; location of, ix, 4–5; methodological difficulties of, xi–xiv, 12–13, 213–14, 216
 French, 49, 62, 69, 113, 277 n.7
 Galicia. *See* Gallego
 Gallego, 136, 264 nn.18,19
 Gandoca, 20
 Garvey, Marcus, 98–101, 147, 155, 219, 259 n.11, 260 n.13. *See also* UNIA
 Geest, 240 n.3, 255 n.5
 Gender, x, 239 n.3. *See also under* Women
 General Confederation of Labor, 60
 Ghost Dance, 155
 Gollito Division, 7, 22, 190, 242 n.17
 Gordon, Edmund, 257 n.12
 Gordon, Leroy, 114, 265 n.22
 Great Britain, 50, 52, 73, 94, 104; colonialism of, 26–28, 51, 93, 94–95, 104, 254 n.12; colonial officers, 55–57, 69, 94–95, 105. *See also* Blacks, and U.S./Anglo-Saxons
 Great Depression, 19, 89, 90
 Grenada, 61
 Guadeloupe, 19, 61, 64
 Guanacaste. *See under* Costa Rica;
 Guanacastecans
 Guanacastecans, 84, 179, 192, 209, 271 nn.8,9; in class/ethnic hierarchy, 41, 78, 84, 184–85, 195, 219, 273 n.3; discrimination against, 78, 185, 191, 194; enter labor force, 74, 133, 183, 196, 200, 272 n.13; and labor movement, 186, 200–202, 204, 207; and work process, 194–97. *See also* Costa Ricans; Hispanics
 Guapiles, 22, 79, 108, 197
 Guatemala, 7, 17, 19, 20, 208, 244 n.5, 246 n.18, 265 n.20, 272 n.12
 Guatemalans. *See* Guatemala
 Guaymí, 233, 262 nn.1,10, 264 n.16, 265 n.26, 273 n.5; author's relationship to, xii, 261 n.5; and cash economy, 113, 115, 269 n.14; from Chiriquí, 111, 112, 113, 127, 142, 146–47, 261 nn.4,6, 264 n.13, 266 m.8,9; and class/ethnic hierarchy, 111, 129–31, 134–35, 137, 153, 184, 219, 261–62 nn.6,2, 263 nn.8,9, 264 n.17, 270 n.15; Coastal, 114–15, 118, 130, 218, 248 n.6, 268 n.18; from Cricamola, 114–16, 125, 131, 134, 137, 218, 264 n.17, 265 n.22; discrimination against, ix–xi, 111, 115, 119, 121–25, 128, 130, 135–43, 153, 157, 159, 171, 172, 174, 194, 219, 224, 226, 227,

- 265 nn.21-23, 266 n.3; enter labor force, 111-19, 123-24, 126-27, 131, 134-35, 139-41, 146, 160, 164, 191, 197, 262 nn.7,8, 263 n.3, 264 n.13, 273 n.6; and internalized racism, 115, 139, 141, 143, 149, 155; and labor movement, 116-19, 126, 132, 146-55, 200, 222, 266 n.4, 267 n.12, 268 n.17, 276 n.2; and mamachí religion, 154-55, 219, 267 n.13; Miskitu raids on, 28, 112-13, 248 n.8; number of, 111, 114, 129-31, 151, 156, 234-36, 261 nn.2,3, 268 n.16; and political orientation, 145-48, 153-55, 157, 204, 214-15, 218, 258 n.8, 265-66 n.28, 266-67 nn.9,13, 268 n.18; and subsistence economy, 111, 116-17, 120-21, 215, 276 n.2; territory of, 28, 111-12; and West Indians, 113, 115. *See also under* Bocas del Toro Division; Labor conflicts; Labor movement; Pesticides
- Haitians, 62
- Health conditions, 3, 4, 5, 47-50, 72, 126, 133, 187, 251 n.7, 253 nn.6,7, 272 n.14
- Hernández, Omar, 81
- Hill, Robert, 259 n.11
- Hispanics, 33, 81, 123-24, 134, 179, 209, 233; author's relationship to, xii, 13; in class/ethnic hierarchy, 41, 66, 73-78, 79, 80-84, 87, 95-96, 99-100, 109-10, 128, 181-82, 184-85, 192, 219, 251 n.9, 257 nn.13,14, 272-73 n.2; discrimination against, 51, 66, 73, 78, 94, 96, 103, 104, 109-10, 182, 221, 256 n.9; enter labor force, 56-59, 74-75, 76, 77, 87, 88, 179-84, 188, 251 n.13, 270 n.1, 271-72 n.11; and internalized racism, 211-12, 276 n.24; and labor movement, 23, 54, 56-57, 128, 146, 151, 180, 200-211, 254 n.12; number of, 180, 183, 185, 186, 189, 191-92, 199, 200-201, 234-37, 257 n.16; political orientation of, 104, 157, 194, 200-205, 214; privileged, 77, 87, 88, 133, 192, 199, 202, 210, 211-12, 252 n.2, 276 n.24; racism of, 84, 171, 172, 250 n.5; as strikebreakers, 54, 56-57, 180-81, 200-201, 203-4 (*see also* Labor conflicts, Sixaola strike of 1982). *See also* Chiricanos; Costa Ricans; Guanacastecans; Hondurans; Labor conflicts; Labor movement; Nicaraguans; Panamanians; Salvadorans
- Holloman, Regina, 162
- Hondurans, 91, 179, 193, 210, 219; deportation of, 151, 205-6, 218, 275 n.17; enter labor force, 188-89, 198, 272 nn.11-13
- Honduras, 7, 17, 19, 20, 21, 27, 169, 188, 208, 217, 241 n.9, 244 nn.6,7, 245 n.11, 266 n.7; immigration, 45, 217, 275-76 n.20, 276 n.3
- ICFTU (International Confederation of Free Trade Unions), 9-10
- IDA (Institute for Agrarian Development), 42
- Ideology: definition of, x-xi; relationship to class, x-xi, xiv-xv, 40-41, 85, 109, 213, 224. *See also under* Class; Ethnic discrimination; Ethnicity
- Indian Inspector, 117-19
- Italians, 47-48, 253 n.4
- Jamaica. *See* Jamaicans
- Jamaicans, 19, 48-49, 61, 62, 73, 74, 75-76, 83, 87, 94-95, 99, 216-17, 245 n.11, 248 n.7, 254 n.12, 255 n.19; on Panama Canal, 48, 217, 255 n.18; reputation as workers, 51-53, 64, 65, 222. *See also* Labor conflicts, early history of; *and under* West Indians
- Johnson, Frederick, 113
- Kantule, Nelo, 162
- Keith, Minor, 14, 23, 29, 46, 47, 48, 49, 52, 75, 243 n.2, 252 nn.1,2, 253 nn.4,5, 254 n.12
- Kepner, Charles, 8, 182
- Kingston, 46
- Koch, Charles, 69, 75, 78, 89, 255 n.1, 260-61 n.19
- Kuna, 134, 233, 268 n.1, 269 n.8; author's relationship to, xii-xiii; in class/ethnic hierarchy, 169-71, 269 nn.9,10,12, 270 n.5; enter the labor force, 160-61, 163-69, 172, 191, 269 n.7; exploitability of, x-xi, 166-68, 174-76,

Kuna (*continued*)

270n.15; General Congress, 162, 164, 166, 173, 269n.5; and internalized racism, 171; and labor movement, 167, 174-78, 215-16, 270n.19; number of, 161, 167, 170, 175-76, 234-36; relationship to North Americans, xiii, 88, 269n.7; respect for, 169, 171-72, 176, 177, 224; traditional political institutions, 160-62, 164-68, 171-73, 225, 268-69nn.3-5; women, ix, 269nn.11, 13, 270n.15

Labarge, Richard Allen, 211-12

Labor conflicts, 22, 128-29, 158-59, 203, 205, 246n.18, 260n.15, 266n.7; Bocas strike of 1960, 102, 148-53, 167, 176, 207, 210, 219, 266-67nn.4, 6,9,10, 276n.2; Bocas strike of 1979, 156-57; Colombia strike, 11, 241n.13, 242n.17, 254n.12; early history of, 48, 51-65, 101, 180; ethnic divisions within, 21, 58-63, 87, 107-9, 149, 151-52, 158-59, 167, 168, 180, 206, 226, 253-54n.12, 267nn.10,11; Italians' strike, 48, 52; Limón strike of 1934, 52, 59, 92, 102, 105, 106-9, 203, 206, 208-9, 221, 276n.18; repression of, 54-60, 94-95, 99, 135, 152, 200-201, 205-9, 215-16, 253n.11, 266nn.6,7, 267nn.9,11, 274nn.8,9, 275n.17; Sixaola strike of 1918, 55-57, 58, 60, 70, 92, 95, 99-100, 253n.11; Sixaola strike of 1982, 21-22, 135, 177, 178, 200-201, 203-4, 207, 210, 216, 218, 237, 270n.19, 274nn.8,10. *See also* Guaymí, and labor movement; His-panics, and labor movement; West In-dians, and labor movement

Labor movement, 9-13, 22, 51-65, 101, 104-7, 145-47, 186, 220, 242n.16, 242-43n.17; company manipulation of, ix, 9-11, 21-22, 59, 111, 117-19, 132-34, 145-46, 151, 153, 155-59, 165-69, 200, 204-9, 214, 216-19, 223-26, 242n.14, 253-54n.12, 259-60n.12, 265n.27, 266n.1, 268n.17, 271n.6; ethnic divisions within, 58-65, 87, 111, 118, 134, 136-37, 140-41, 142, 145-46, 148, 153, 155-59, 166-

67, 174-75, 176, 209-11, 214, 216-18, 222-27, 254nn.14,15, 268n.15; re-pression of, 11-13, 58-60, 71, 94-95, 99, 146-48, 151, 204, 220, 242n.17, 243nn.18,19, 266nn.2,3, 273-74n.7, 275n.14; Sixaola Cacao Workers' Union, 273-74n.7; Solidarity Associa-tions, 11; union elections, 104, 159, 214-15, 222-23, 268nn.15-17, 277n.5. *See also* Anti-communism; Blacks, political orientation of; Guay-mí, and labor movement; West Indians, and labor movement; *and under* Com-munist party; Labor conflicts

Las Tablas, 125

Limon, port of. *See* Limón Division; Limón Province

Limón Division, 7, 20, 22, 80, 81, 246n.18; early history of, 45-49, 51-55, 62, 69, 71, 74-75, 88-90, 98-101, 106, 179-81, 252n.2, 255n.4. *See also* Labor conflicts, early history of; Labor conflicts, Limón strike of 1934, West Indians, and labor movement

Limón Province, 7, 20, 45, 65, 70, 78-82, 85, 92, 94, 180, 183, 185, 255n.1, 257n.13. *See also* Limón Division

McCann, Thomas, 22

Marijuana, 82, 251n.11

Martinique, 61, 62, 64, 222

Marx, Karl, 34

May, Stacy, 265n.22

Mayorga, Don Simón, 25, 26, 28, 32, 36, 58, 250n.3

Menchú, Rigoberta, 264-65n.20

Merchants, 115, 135-36, 137, 257n.15, 264nn.18,19, 265n.20; Hispanic shanty sellers, ix-x; West Indians in Tala-manca, 28-30, 34-35, 113

Miami, 105, 257n.12

Miskitu Amerindians, 27-28, 248nn.7-9, 262n.9, 267-68n.14

Mobile, Alabama, 64

Molas, 171

Mora, Manuel, 59, 109

Morales Valdelomar, Narciso, 200, 274n.10

Murillo, Carmen, 81

- Nación, La*, 203
 Nazis, 277 n.6
Negro World, The, 99
 Newton, Velma, 50
 New York, 10, 46, 80, 105, 122, 156, 245 n.12, 257 n.12; Harlem, 99
 Nicaragua, 19, 27, 189, 194, 254 n.12, 257 n.12, 271 n.7; Rivas Province, 182-83, 190, 273 n.2. *See also* Miskitu
 Nicaraguans, 186, 193, 210, 219, 271 n.9, 272 n.1; in class/ethnic hierarchy, xi, 41, 86-88, 128, 181-83, 194-96, 272-73 nn.1-4; deportation of, 151, 205-7, 272 n.15; discrimination against, xi, 179, 182, 185, 191, 194, 203, 219, 275 n.15; enter labor force, 74, 133, 182-83, 188-90, 200, 272 nn.11-14; political orientation, 201-3, 206; as strikebreakers, 54, 180; strike participation of, 54, 203, 206, 208-9, 275 n.18; and violence, 179, 182-83, 201-3, 275 n.15
 North Americans. *See under* Whites
 Occupational safety, 126-27, 130-31, 241 n.11, 263 n.3, 264 n.14, 265 n.25. *See also* Pesticides
 Olotobiliquina, 163, 164-66, 168, 172, 175, 269 n.6
 ORIT (Inter-American Regional Labor Organization), 9-10, 11, 156, 242 nn.14,15
 PAIS (Agroindustrial Producers of Six-*añola*), 4, 12, 42-43, 240 n.3, 249 n.10
 Panama, 3, 5, 7, 14-15, 19, 20, 21, 22, 48, 89, 90, 95, 264 n.15; government of, 4, 16-18, 20-21, 23, 90, 99, 117, 124, 245 n.10, 246-47 nn.15-17,20, 249 n.1, 260 n.14; immigration laws, 47, 79, 89-93, 186, 189-90, 205, 271-72 n.11, 277 n.8 (*see also* Blacks, citizenship of); National Guard, 162, 174, 267 n.11. *See also* Repression, by Panamanian authorities
 Panama Canal, 48-49, 51, 65, 79, 86, 88, 102, 170, 172, 187, 198-99, 217, 218, 240 n.3, 253 nn.6,8, 254 n.15, 255 n.18, 258 n.1, 269 nn.5,7, 270 n.16, 271 n.10; Panama Canal Company, 60, 277 nn.4,7
 Panama City, 23, 80, 90, 121, 192, 269 n.11
 Panama disease, 7, 16, 24, 32, 33, 67, 168, 188, 217, 233, 241 n.8, 244 n.4, 249 n.14, 255 n.2
 Panamanians, 91, 98, 179; refuse Company employment, 46, 121, 180, 187, 189, 191, 192, 194, 199, 209; and work process, 122, 198-99. *See also under* Panama
 Paredes, Americo, xii
 Pascal, Reverend, 113, 117, 150, 261-62 n.6, 262 n.8
 Peasants, 25, 63, 67-72, 185, 187, 221, 226, 255 nn.2,3,5; advantage of being, 38, 219, 260-61 n.19; Blacks as, 66-70, 72-73, 76-78, 79, 80-82, 83, 93, 102-4, 108, 221, 227, 260-61 n.19; Bribrí as, 37-39, 41, 44, 250 n.6; rejection of wage work by, 37-38, 41, 44, 68, 219, 249 n.1
 Pesticides, x-xi, 241 n.7; aerial spraying, 3-4, 128, 169, 233, 241 n.8, 263 n.6; Chlorotlalonil, 3, 128; DDT, 124; Dithane, 3, 128; Gramoxone, 128-29; nematocides, 127-28, 263 nn.4,5
 Plaza, Galo, 265 n.22
 Potassium fertilizer, ix
 Preston, Andrew, 14
 Production process, 3-13, 168-69, 271 n.6; cultivation, 6-9, 269 n.10; ecological problems, 6-7, 16-17, 19, 24, 32, 33, 67, 168-69, 188, 217, 233, 241 n.8, 244 n.4, 249 n.14, 255 n.2; Gran Nain bananas, 8, 185; Gros Michel bananas, 168; harvesting, 6, 130-31, 263-64 nn.10-12; instability of banana, 6-8, 16-19, 32-33, 67, 70, 75, 78, 114, 124, 132, 166-67, 217, 233, 245-46 n.14; packing plant, 5-9, 130-31, 158-59, 168-69, 192, 226, 240 n.5, 263-64 nn.10-12, 264 nn.11-12; piecework, 9, 74, 123-24, 130, 131, 158-59, 226, 241 n.11, 262-63 n.2, 269 n.10, 271 n.5; puree plant, 162, 169, 177; quality, 8-9, 122, 131, 241 n.10; Valerie bananas, 8, 168, 169, 185; value of bananas, 8-9, 122, 131, 241 n.10. *See also under* Subsistence production

- Prostitutes, 135, 140-41, 172, 265 nn.24,25
- Puntarenas, 274 n.7
- Purcell, Trevor, 80, 251 n.10, 259 n.9
- Quepos Division, 22, 190
- Quince, Duncan, 62
- Racism. *See* Ethnic discrimination
- RECOPE (Refinería Costarricense de Petróleo), 31, 37
- Refugees, 208-9, 276 n.21
- Reid, Charles, 86
- Repression, 54-55, 94-95, 135, 152, 206-9, 272 n.1, 275 n.19; blacklist, 11-12, 93, 126, 148, 176, 200-201, 204, 215, 243 n.18, 273-74 n.7, 275 n.14, 276 n.1; by Costa Rican authorities, 54-60, 73, 200-204, 207, 242 n.17, 251 n.13, 253 n.11, 274 nn.8-11, 275 n.14; by Panamanian authorities, 54-57, 59-60, 99, 205, 267 n.11; spy system, 12-13, 243 n.19; by United Fruit Company, 11-13, 70, 93, 204-7, 215-16, 220, 266 nn.2,3,6,7, 274 nn.7-9, 275 n.17. *See also* under Labor conflict; Labor movement
- Río Frio, 197
- Rosaldo, Renato, xii
- Russians, 106, 204
- St. Kitts, 54, 61, 62, 71, 253 n.10, 255 n.17; as strikebreakers, 54, 71
- St. Lucia, 61, 62
- Salvadorans, 197, 202, 203, 208, 209, 271 n.10, 272 nn.1,12, 275-76 nn.20, 21
- San Blas, 46, 161, 162, 164-67, 170, 171, 172, 173, 177, 268 nn.2,3, 270 n.19
- San Carleños, 204
- Sandinistas, 190, 203, 208, 209, 241 n.6, 244 n.8, 272 n.15, 273 n.5, 276 n.22
- Sandino, 208, 275 n.19. *See also* Sandinistas
- San José, 23, 60, 61, 80, 82, 197, 265 n.24
- Schifter, Jacobo, 275 n.13
- Schuverer, Virgilio, 149-53, 266 n.5, 267 n.12
- Sigatoka, 4, 127, 233, 241 n.8, 244 n.4
- Sipurio, 26
- Squires, 22
- Sixaola Bridge, 7, 24, 25, 82, 97, 247 n.1
- Sixaola District, 4, 7, 8, 10, 12-13, 21-22, 24-25, 28, 80, 82, 130-35, 185, 236, 240 n.3, 241 n.12, 270-71 n.3; cacao in, 33, 67, 75, 87, 184, 199, 200, 255 n.4, 271 n.4; early history, 67, 70-73, 181, 183, 252 n.1; infrastructure of, 4-5, 125, 132-33, 197-98, 247 n.4; replanting bananas in, 5, 8, 132, 157-58, 196, 209, 273 n.6, 276 n.21; strike of 1918, 55-57, 58, 60, 70, 92, 95, 99-100, 253 n.11; strike of 1982, 21-22, 135, 177, 178, 200-201, 203-4, 207, 210, 216, 218, 237, 270 n.19, 274 nn.8,10
- Somoza, General, 189
- Spanish colonialism, 26-28
- Squatters: black, 70-73, 77, 186; Hispanic, 39, 72, 186-87, 201, 202, 251 n.13, 275 n.14; in Sixaola, 72-73, 186, 240 n.3, 251 n.13, 255 n.4, 274 n.12, 275 n.15; in Talamanca, 25, 30, 39, 41-43, 70, 73, 251 n.13, 255 n.4. *See also* West Indians, land struggles of
- Standard Fruit Company, 244 n.5, 246 n.17, 250 n.4, 254 n.12, 264 n.11, 276 n.22. *See also* Castle and Cooke
- Strikes. *See* under Labor conflicts
- Subsistence production: and Blacks, 68, 69-70, 73, 79, 227; and Bribri, 34-35; and Guaymí, 111, 116-17, 120-21, 215, 276 n.2; and Hispanics, 180, 183, 185; and Kuna, 160, 164, 167, 171; and Teribe, 249 n.1; and United Fruit Company, 49, 70, 256 n.10. *See also* Bribri, and outside economy
- Suretka, 25, 30, 32, 67
- Talamanca District, 7, 8, 251 nn.11,13; acreage, 24-25, 42-44; cacao in, 26, 29, 67, 41, 251 n.11, 255 n.4; company abandons, 24, 32-33, 42; destruction of infrastructure, 8, 24, 32; early history, 24-37, 40-42, 46, 71, 73, 183, 247-48 nn.2, 4-7, 251 n.10; peasants in, 25, 37-39, 67, 70; poverty indicators, 38, 41; railroad in, 24, 25, 29, 32, 181; squatters in, 25, 30, 39, 41-43, 70, 73, 251 n.13, 255 n.4; West Indians in, 26, 27-28, 33-36, 93. *See also* La-

- bor conflicts, early history of; *and under* Bribri
- Teribe Amerindians, 248 nn.6,8, 249 n.1; Miskitu raids on, 249 n.1
- Trabajo*, 107, 254 n.14
- Trinidad, 61, 222
- Trouillot, Michel-Rolph, 240 n.3, 255 n.5
- Trujillo, 27
- Turrialba, 204
- UNHCR (United Nations High Commission on Refugees), 209, 276 n.21
- UNIA (Universal Negro Improvement Association), 85, 98–101, 260 n.15. *See also* Garvey, Marcus
- Unions. *See under* Labor conflicts; Labor movement
- United Brands, 3, 14, 18, 42, 156, 211, 225, 239 n.1, 240 n.3
- United Fruit Company, ix, x, 3, 6–12, 14, 86, 101, 210, 239 n.1, 243 n.1; destruction of infrastructure, 8, 24, 32, 241 n.9; manipulating host governments), 17–21, 199, 240 n.3, 244 nn.6–9, 245 n.10, 11, 246 nn.15–17, 260 n.14, 267 n.11, 273 n.6, 274 n.9, 277 n.7; and military governments, 17, 244 n.6; monopoly practices, 14–23, 68, 69, 217, 233, 244 nn.4,5, 245 n.12, 247 n.3; and peasant economy, 25, 63, 66–72, 185, 187, 221, 255 n.3; and U.S. government, 17, 99, 100, 242 n.14, 244 n.8, 245 n.11, 277 n.7; worldwide projection, 6–7, 14, 17, 19–21, 45–46. *See also* Chiriqui Land Company; CO-BANA; PAIS; United Brands
- United States, 86, 88, 104, 105, 218, 225, 241 n.10, 250 n.3; Consul, 163, 269 n.7; government of, 17, 99, 100, 242 n.14, 244 n.8, 245 n.11, 277 n.7; immigration 10, 46, 79, 102, 105, 257 n.12, 260 n.13, 269 n.11; Army, 79, 93, 105, 114, 161, 170, 187, 208, 269 n.7, 270 n.16, 275 n.18. *See also* Blacks, emigration of; Blacks, and U.S./Anglo-Saxons
- UPEB (Union of Banana Producing Countries), 21, 240 n.1
- Ustupo, 166
- UTRAKUNA (Union of Kuna Workers), 172–77, 270 nn.16,18
- Veraguas Province, 111, 112, 122, 262 n.1
- Voice of the Atlantic*, 92, 106, 108
- Volio, 33, 42–43, 251 n.13
- Walker, William, 43, 251 n.14
- War, Panama/Costa Rica 1921, 23, 61
- WCTU (World Confederation of Trade Unions), 10, 242 n.16
- West Indians, 200, 233, 256 n.6; and Bribri, 28–29, 32–33, 249 n.12, 250 n.2; “exploitability” of, 48–51, 64–65, 68, 132, 194, 215, 222, 272 n.14; as global labor reserve, 45–51; internal regional/national differentiation, 61–65, 216–17, 221–22, 255 nn.17,18; and labor movement, 45, 51–65, 72, 95, 99–101, 147, 181, 206, 217, 253 nn.8,9, 254 n.12, 255 n.19; land struggles of, 28–30, 72–73, 93, 255 n.4; as merchants among Bribri, 29, 34–35; and slavery, 50, 51, 84, 95, 219, 256 n.10; in Talamanca, 26, 27–28, 33–36, 93. *See also* Labor conflicts, early history of; *and under* Blacks
- Whites, 74, 75, 87, 88, 93, 137, 192, 203, 210, 211–12, 249 nn.6,13, 251–52 nn.12,14, 254 n.12, 256 n.8, 258 n.5, 271 n.8; author’s relationship to, xiii, xiv; hegemony of, xi, 95–97, 104–5, 210–12, 276 n.24; racism of, 45, 47–48, 51, 64, 85–88, 96, 115, 137, 198, 245 n.11, 258 nn.1–3, 260 n.17, 265 n.21; relationship to blacks, 45, 51–52, 76, 79, 93–97, 100, 102–5, 220–21, 259 n.10, 260 n.17. *See also* Blacks, and U.S./Anglo-Saxons
- White Zone, 4, 87, 266 n.5
- Women, 43, 169, 213, 241 n.6; Black, 257 n.17; and family, 271 n.3; Guaymí, 113, 248 n.8, 269 n.13; Hispanic, 140–41, 186; Kuna, ix, 170, 171, 173, 269 nn.11,13, 270 n.15. *See also* Gender
- World War II, 19, 61, 65, 79, 93, 100, 102, 114, 187, 189, 193, 205, 218, 221, 233, 254 n.15, 256 n.10, 271 n.10
- Young, Philip, 113
- Zemurray, Samuel, 17