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April 6, 2017

The Folkloric Traditions of Masaya:
El Mestizaje as a Process,
a State of Being,
and a Culture

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Abstract
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By Isabelle Dao-Ahn McDermott Lee

“The only constant in life is change.” What this old adage leaves out is that everything is in a constant state of change, multiplicity, and becoming. Systems which attempt to label us as static, inert entities limit our thinking and possibilities of existence. Existing as one’s full self despite these constraints can generate new cultures and ways of being.

In Masaya, Nicaragua, today’s dominant culture of *mestizaje* is the result of the arrival of the Spaniards to the Americas and the process of racial and cultural blend that followed between Spanish, indigenous and African peoples. But in this mixing process, Spaniards held disproportionate power: most of the changes they imposed were made through violent and deceptive imposition. Yet indigenous and African people still subversively preserved their traditions and left bold influences on the new *mestizx* culture. This essay records how these cultures amalgamated and are present in Masaya’s folklore and sense of identity, paying mind both to the influences of the cultures that mixed to form it as well as giving dignity to *mestizaje* as its own distinct culture.

It also explores the concept of *mestizaje* as a process of racial and cultural syncretism that is still occurring in Masaya today. This modern *mestizaje* is a more balanced, natural, and equal exchange of cultures occurring in numerous ways, including through globalization and technological advances. Masaya’s traditions of folklore, which were originally produced through a process of amalgamating discrete global elements, are now being subjected to a more modern fusion. This investigation also examines how Masaya deals with tradition, notions of change and preservation, and contemporary perspectives on mixed identity.

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Epigraph

Signature in Sestina

I'm not sure what curious strangers think when they look at me
And attempt to categorize my ambiguous features, but my name doesn't them give many clues.
Moniker number one outrules hypotheses of Latina lineage with its spelling, French in origin: *Isabelle*.
Lee is what follows, with roots both in Asia and, à la Robert E., in the Southern U.S. A farreaching name.
But these are just bookends; you'll find answers where they meet in the middle.
Dissect each title piece by piece.

In the Roman alphabet, my middle name is Dao-Ahn, which my poetic Taiwanese father has always said means "Pathway to Peace,"
But 李道安 represents "Plum Road Safe," Google Translate informs me.
The Dao De Ching constructs yin & yang: two opposites that coil together, but don't mix, divided down the middle.
I try impressing cousins with the only Mandarin I know, but they snicker at my name's butchered tones. I haven't got a clue.
"Ahn" deconstructed contains the characters of a woman in a house, yet I recall Grandma telling me that mine is boy's name.
My generation of Lee family shares the name "Dao," chosen by ancestors who never imagined they'd have a descendant christened *Isabelle*.

"God is my oath" is the significance of the title *Isabelle*,
But my mother's Irish last name honors a mythic deity of battle, no friend to the monotheistic God of love and peace.
Mom wouldn't let marriage erase her identity; she kept *McDermott* and preserved it in the middle of her daughters' names.
In Gaelic, *MacDiarmaid* meant "son of the god of arms," but I'm no one's son, and Mom doesn't look like a masculine general to me.
"The country ruptured from theology. Protestants and Catholics fought until new borders halved the land," my mom clues
Me in. I'm composed of clashing contradictions. A breathing oxymoron. A Venn diagram with no middle.

Am I being torn apart or inwardly muddled?
My first name is far more bold than me: it inherently is. The confidently verbed *Isabelle*.
I want to exist with such conviction, to be. I start to decode myself by assembling the clues:
I come from both Southern North Carolina and East Asia, from both courageous warriors and trailblazers of peace,
From enduring lines of both women and men, from philosophy and religion and myth. This is me. This is my name.

My name
Is comprised of opposites, of two contrasting opposites that collide in the middle.
But with a shift in perspective, they're complementary halves that unite to form me,
Isabelle.
All things whole consist of smaller pieces:
The keys to my assurance and my history hidden in the clues.

Sometimes clues
Don't fit together, and sometimes people don't fit in, but I claim my name.
I am called by words of languages I can't fathom, but I still know myself. There's more to a person than the piece
Of paper their Birth Certificate is on. The human and title by which we call it are separate, yet connected, joining in the middle.
I am identified, but not defined by *Isabelle*.
The being behind the name, encompassed in heritage and contradiction, is me.

Words can harbor both trifles and substance; they can leave me clueless or clue
Me in. *Isabelle Dao-Ahn McDermott Lee* is shuffled pieces of alphabet, a concept, and an ancestry that bring me peace.
I name the center between absolutes my home. I balance in the middle.

Preface

The sestina is one of the most rigid poetic forms there is. It forces the author to end each line with one of a set of six words, requiring repetitions that produce circuitous writing that dwells on each thought. A few semesters ago, the assigned prompt for my creative writing class was to “write a poem about your name.” Without my really meaning to write about them, the unyielding sestina form articulated for me questions and insecurities I have had my whole life. A nonfluency of self, a harborlessness, a wandering nomadism with unsure footing, an amorphous incoherence—all culminating in a lonely helplessness to self-define through words and a hope for meaning and knowledge beyond them. Ironically, even though my thesis was a completely open-ended endeavor and the poem dictated a stringent template, they somehow both brought me to the same destination. Both my sestina and thesis have reminded me of the challenges of language: so much of the meaning and experience I feel cannot be expressed in words. Sometimes, to define something is to capture it, to limit its possibilities and how it might change in the future. This printed word on this printed page—it scares me. Because I cannot come back and alter it. It is fixed. If I had never written it down, it could continue evolving in my mind, exceeding the borders drawn around a term’s definitions in order to exclude and include what it can be. Trying to describe *why* words can be hard for me *with* words is futile. Someday when I am rereading this project, I will see a thousand things in the body of this work I will wish I had changed, and I will sigh a thousand times. Because of what it could have been.

Yet there are possibilities to move forward even in exploring the limited nature of words. For example, the word “human” triggers a set of semantic associations in the mind. The connotative thoughts from personal experience rise to the surface, form, cluster, shift, reform into meaning. In the dictionary, a term often is defined by distinguishing what it is and

what it is not. The entry demarcates clean nouns with firm, discrete boundaries to contain it. The word represents meaning, and the word is a noun, meaning that it is a person, place, or thing, a simple static entity. The phrase “human being” means the same thing as “human,” yet the inclusion of the gerund “being” adds a dimension of life to the word, like the soft hum of a car engine reverberating under one’s feet. The implied verb “to be” reminds us of the “*I am*” of humanity, the subject *and* the action. It intimates that we are constantly, actively existing. A being is a being—a process, a verb. I am not really a fixed, coherent, unified, stable noun Isabelle, but I am always Isabelleing. In their philosophical work titled *A Thousand Plateaus*, French thinkers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari challenge the linguistic constraints that enforce notions of fixed, singular existence and instead offer the idea of everything as a transforming process, a becoming.¹

My “being” is categorized (among many other things) as twenty-two-year-old biracial ciswoman who was raised in an upper-middle class family in the United States. For the majority of my life, one of the most salient features of my identity has been my race. My dad is Taiwanese American while my mom grew up in the Southern U.S. and has Irish heritage. Growing up biracial could be very isolating and painful. Since I lack a phenotypical and linguistic link to Taiwan, since my identity and the makeup of my family are often questioned, since I did not receive the affirmation of seeing people like me represented in my life or in the media, since I grew up in a country with a highly racialized history and rigid ethnic social order based on assumed monoraciality, I sometimes felt invisible, lonely, incomplete, and unconfident during my formative years.

The human use of language exemplifies our attempts to make sense of the world, a perpetually fluctuating, infinitely multiplicitous plethora of processes colliding with each other, by representing their semi-stable states with words. We attempt to assign meaning to

¹ Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

that which the linguistic unit represents (that which is represented cannot be enumerated in language because no matter what, it is still mediated through language). We then organize these notions, articulated in words, in relation to other words, grouping and dividing perceived similarity and difference, layering and juxtaposing significance, constructing hierarchies of value.

There is nothing wrong with the mediation in and of itself: the chaos of the processes of existence is overwhelming, and some of the processes occur on such a small or slow scale that it makes sense to recognize them as stable entities. Yet it becomes a problem when we start mistaking these representations for reality, when we refuse to adapt our definitions to describe true existence and instead try to prescriptively force it to conform with the constructed categories. It is possible for the history of these meanings and ideas and systems to become inverted, for us to think that the simplified immutable representations are, in fact, actuality and to foist the representations' definitions on what they should or should not be. This error has very real consequences in our lives; imposed rigidity can damage that which is just naturally being what it is. As Polish scholar Alfred Korzybski famously said, "the map is not the territory. The word is not the thing."² If these human-made systems do not change to account for the reality they are meant to describe, they are oppressive.

I did not truly understand the weight of these implications until these past few years. Upon entering college, I have found solace in studying race and gender, which made me realize that the only person who can define my identity is me. Getting involved in social justice communities and organizations on campus led to the formation of my closest friendships through which I learned that being whole is not always about homogeneity; multiple parts—each different and each essential—can combine to form a whole. I first became academically interested in mixed-race identity in Latin America after reading Gloria

² Korzybski, Alfred, "A Non-Aristotelian System and its Necessity for Rigour in Mathematics and Physics," (*Science and Sanity*, 1933), 747-61.

Anzaldúa's "*Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*" in my WGSS 100 class during my first semester of college. It was one of the first times I ever saw experiences like my own and questions I have always had on paper: How do I negotiate my sense of self in a society which does not have room for multiplicity, ambiguity, and mutability? Why is it that I come from two cultures/races, yet I feel like I don't belong to either? Who will recognize me and claim me? These questions are both incredibly painful and incredibly important. We need to ask them (as we have been for a long time), and others need to finally listen hard. We deserve answers and solutions. Although some of the inquiries are specific to existing as a multicultural person (or anyone existing outside/between societal frameworks as an impossible possibility), they would benefit us all, allowing us to live more honestly.

All of these experiences and perspectives compose the lens with which I navigate the world. My personal grapplings with identity have made me want to learn more about how other multiracial and multicultural people express who they are. Although no one's lineage is composed of completely one group, it is a social reality that many societies have operated under the paradigm of simple, neat racial absolutism and ignore more complex narratives. During the spring of my junior year, my study abroad program in Nicaragua sent us off on our own for the last month to creatively inquire and engage with different peoples and ideas. My research project, based in Masaya, Nicaragua, centered on investigating the confluence of different races and their formation of a new culture. Since returning to Emory, I have grounded my findings in theory, history, sociology, Latin American studies, and more, thus enriching my contextual understanding and analysis. This honors thesis has been incredibly personal and incredibly challenging for me. Although it is hard for me to fix it in this static form, I am so grateful for how much I have learned from it and will continue to keep learning from it as I keep becoming.

Thank you for joining me on this investigation. First, I will ground and connect some

common terms, concepts, and themes recurring throughout this thesis. The following section is a historical examination of still-prevailing notions of race came to be in colonial Nicaragua. In the last section, I analyze my findings from investigations in modern-day Masaya, Nicaragua through personal accounts with interviewees and observations of cultural traditions generated, altered, and preserved through *mestiz* mechanisms.

Terms, Concepts, and Themes

It is ironic that in the Preface of this paper, I argued against the use of limiting definitions and words to understand the world. However, for the purposes of this senior thesis essay, I must explain my ideas using the written word, but I will do so with intentionality and specificity. As noted previously, using these modes of understanding the world is not always detrimental; it is only when one mistakes these representations of ideas for the ideas themselves and applies the limits of the representation on the idea. When reading this paper, please keep in mind that the meanings behind the terms, concepts, and themes may be larger, less fixed, and more complex than the definitions can explain.

- *Mestizaje*: as a proper noun, this term refers to a historically-specific process of racial and cultural mixing amongst indigenous, African, and Spanish peoples that began in Nicaragua with the arrival of the Spaniards in 1524. It comes with connotations of unequal power dynamics imposed through conquest and colonization.
- *Mestizx* (adj): this term's origin (used here in its gender neutral form) corresponds historically with the era described above. It was invented to define people of mixed indigenous-Spanish ancestry, yet it is commonly used now as a general descriptor of Latin America's unique racial history, thus including African legacy as well. It can be employed to refer to anything "mixed" of Latin America. Even if an individual from the region does not identify as racially hybrid, most of the cultures of the region have been heavily affected by Spanish, Black, and aboriginal influences and are thus *mestizx*. When I refer to *mestizx* in my paper, I am always referring to the "triple" mix (unless otherwise specified) in order to include all mixed peoples.
- *mestizaje* (n): a general phenomenon of change that occurs through the mixture of races and cultures in any way and over any time period. The degrees of change may

be small and occur on a minor scale or they may be much more dramatic; they exist on a spectrum. This broadened definition can describe historical *Mestizaje*, but not vice versa.

- Race: race is an incredibly complex issue. Race, although an example of a humanmade structure founded upon inaccurate logic that does not represent reality, still has very real consequences in life since its historical connotations live on. The general consensus in academia today is that race is a social construction; its supposed basis on biological difference is unfounded.³ However, its roots stay deeply entrenched in society, so while race is not biologically real and every system of racial classification has very many shortcomings, it is still a very salient concept because it still bears a huge effect on how we treat each other. This map is so superimposed on the territory that acting as if it were not would be irresponsible, privileged, and oppressive. There are many confounding factors behind the flawed notion: are all of us mixed to some degree since we all came from a common ancestors? Yes, although not to the same extent. While everyone is multiracial at some point in their lineage, it is not the same degree. Notions of “purity” and “monoraciality” are false, yet I use the term “monoraciality” in quotation marks when referring to someone who does not identify as mixed-race since the paradigm under which we are operating acts as if one can be “monoracial.” If I am one-sixteenth Black, does that mean I get to identify as such? What does it mean if I am Middle Eastern but always get coded as Latinx? To all of these questions, the answer is two-pronged: your identity is yours to dictate, but unfortunately outsiders’ perception of you matters a lot as well. One very light-skinned biracial Black & Jewish kid may not experience as much racism as someone else with darker skin but the same racial makeup.

³ Gannon, Megan, "Race Is a Social Construct, Scientists Argue," *Scientific American*. February 05, 2016, Accessed April 01, 2017. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/race-is-a-social-construct-scientists-argue/>.

In his book *Disidentifications*, José Muñoz offers the concept named in his title as a survival technique for marginalized peoples.

- Identify/assimilate (v): to willingly adopt that which the dominant ideology declares one to be.
- Counteridentify (v): to deny that which the dominant ideology declares one to be. Yet in this reactionary act, one is still defined by the dominant ideology. By declaring that “I am not ‘x,’” one is still defining oneself around the “x” and is still located within the system/framework.
- Disidentify (v): to “situate oneself both within and against the various discourses through which one is called to identify.”⁴ Enacted by minoritarian identities, this “strategy [...] works on and against dominant ideology.”⁵ This action serves as an alternative to simply identifying or counteridentifying.
- Antiblackness in Nicaragua: an especially sinister, specific, and widespread type of racism programmed into the European-imposed racial pyramid. White is supreme, and everything about Blackness is portrayed as the most base and inferior. Sergio Ramírez writes of the phenomenon in Nicaragua as the “astonishing mutilation of our history to remove the African component.”⁶ Afro-descended peoples’ contributions to society and culture are erased or attributed to another source: “Black is that which is not spoken about. [...] What remains of the original culture of African ancestors’ traditions and beliefs is secret traces that need to be tracked or inadvertent signals that are in front of our eyes and we have not able to see because the constant imposition of oblivion. Rene Depestre recalls

⁴ "Disidentification," *Disidentifications*, Accessed May 01, 2016, <http://enculturation.net/files/QueerRhetoric/queerarchive/disid.html>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ramírez, Sergio, *Tambor Olvidado*, (San José de Costa Rica: Aguilar, 2008), 63.

that ‘any cultural expression that comes from a minority and that is adopted by the dominant groups will be made to look like it came into the culture anonymously.’”⁷ The country’s racial dynamics are especially complex because of its colonial legacy from European powers, including the English and Dutch in addition to the Spanish. Although this history goes beyond the scope of my thesis, it should be noted that there is a Spanish-speaking racially “Amerindian” majority in Western Nicaragua (my area of focus) and an English-speaking Afro-descendant majority (with a strong presence of several indigenous groups) on the Caribbean Coast. The history, power dynamics, distance, and differences make for a complicated, interesting relationship between the extremely different coasts (especially since the Eastern Nicaragua is now divided into two autonomous regions). Most of the enslaved population of Nicaragua ended up on the Caribbean Coast, but that does not mean that Western Nicaragua was not heavily influenced by Afro-descended peoples.

- State of being vs process vs identity: the three are related, but distinct. While a state of being is a constant engagement with self and world, identity implies more rigidity and stagnation. The Spanish imposed notions of identity on mixed-race individuals, they activated their fluid *mestizx* consciousnesses and evaded capture. A state of being is personal and individual while a *mestizx* process is more general in terms of what/who/how many can be doing it. Both are verbing, multi-faceted, and in constant motion. As Anzaldúa writes, the “energy” of *mestizx* consciousness “comes from a continual creative motion that keeps breaking down the unitary aspect of each new paradigm,” allowing it freedom and generative

⁷ Ibid.

power in engaging in a larger *mestizx* process.⁸

- *Mestizx* consciousness: a mode of thinking and existing coined by Gloria Anzaldúa. To *la mestiza*, “rigidity means death... she is constantly shifting out of habitual formations [...] operates in a pluralistic mode.”⁹ A *mestiza* consciousness “constantly has to shift to different problems, who constantly includes rather than excludes.”¹⁰
- *Mestizx* processes: infinite modes of change in which *mestizx* people can engage, ranging from disidentifying to signifying to generating new cultural repertoire to becoming to worldmaking to evading capture and more. These are creative, generative, adaptable, multiple, fluid, subversive, messy, powerful forces which allow more possibilities for existence and survival. *Mestizx* peoples are especially inclined to using these mechanisms due to their paradoxical existence in structures that do not account for them. Some of the mechanisms are specific to minoritarian *mestizx* peoples, and some can be used by others as well.

⁸ Anzaldúa, Gloria, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, (San Francisco: Spinster/Aunt Lute, 1987), 81.

⁹ *Ibid*, 101.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 78.

Section 1:

The Construction of Race in Colonial Nicaragua:

Order, Disorder, & Elusion

Most of the “Western” world is governed by the principle that one can neatly, conclusively assign anything a singular label. If the metaphor holds that these labels are merely “map” representations of the more complex “territory,” then prescriptivist Enlightenment-era thinkers were the ultimate cartographers. Such classifications fit into a larger tiered structure which defines their power and value. Designations such as these are usually absolute, such as the prevailing global view of gender as a mutually exclusive binary composed of complementary opposites.¹¹ Distinctions of the like can be not only simplistic in their sweeping generalizations and assumption of static, uniform monolithic categories, but they are also wrong in assuming that human beings are inert entities. Growing populations of mixed-race peoples in colonial Latin America destabilized, subverted, and overthrew such categorical models of identity. They proved that it is the human-constructed systems that are flawed and unnatural, not that which escapes their governance in acts of becoming.

With the invention of race came the gradual, yet steadily developing invention of racist hierarchy. Antiblackness has been rampant in North, South, and Central America since European colonizers developed their systems of chattel slavery in the erroneously-titled “age

¹¹ Such a broad statement as this comes with many caveats. As Argentine feminist scholar María Lugones writes in "Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System," this statement is true of the modern mainstream cultures of most of the world due to "global, Eurocentered [...] capitalism constituted through colonization" (Lugones, María, "Heterosexualism and the Colonial / Modern Gender System," [Hypatia 22, no. 1 2007], 196. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4640051>). Lugones' work examines various Pre-Columbian indigenous communities' understandings of sex that accounted for diverse identities including non-binary, intersex, and gender-fluid peoples. Although variations on the sex/gender models exist and have historically existed across the world, the binary model mentioned is extremely dominant globally. Although most mainstream cultures strictly follow the rigid male/female model and oppress gender non-conforming folks in a variety of ways, there are undercurrents of subcultures across the globe which account for a larger scope of gender identities, from young radical nonbinary people who use “they/them/theirs” pronouns to ancient traditional societies that still practice their own systems.

of discovery.” With this development, they concurrently refined their concept of essentially a racial caste system from earlier models as more intercontinental exchanges took place.

Sociologist Joe Kincheloe writes that, “Europeans prior to the late 1600s did not use the label, Black, to refer to any race of people, Africans included. Only after the racialization of slavery by around 1680 did whiteness and blackness come to represent racial categories.”¹²

As one’s scope widens, one’s identities and the markers delineating them often change. Before any groups encountered any others that appeared very physically different, individuals within the group defined themselves on more specific terms. They may not have even seen each other as members of the same group. The broad label of “European” only has unifying significance when compared to Asian, African, American, etc. Otherwise, groups such as English Protestants, Irish Catholics, and Spanish Catholics would never be classified under the same title. Identity is multi-faceted and relative: as social dynamics change, different traits become more salient and others less. It was not until the colonizers realized that there were new points of comparison that they felt the need to consciously distinguish themselves from one group and unify with others whom they had previously seen as different.

From the fifteenth-century beginnings of the period of conquest and colonization, Europeans exerted extreme power due to their motivation to exploit the land and its peoples in pursuit of “God, gold, and glory.”¹³ Their immunity to pathogens and access to advanced weapons and methods of transportation launched them to a position of dominance from which they situated their cultural customs as the default. In constructing a racial pyramid, the

¹² Kincheloe, Joe L, "The Struggle to Define and Reinvent Whiteness: A Pedagogical Analysis," *College Literature* 26, no. 3 (1999): 174. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25112481>.

¹³ Oziah, Kenneth, *God, Gold, and Glory: The causes of expansion into the New World*, Academia.edu, Academia.edu, October 22, 2011, Accessed December 12, 2016. http://www.academia.edu/1145182/God_Gold_and_Glory_The_causes_of_expansion_into_the_new_world.

descriptor “Black” lumped all peoples of the massive African continent into one category, ignoring huge distinctions between different groups solely due to the higher pigmentation of most of their skin relative to the European colonizers’. As renowned historian John Hope Franklin writes of the complex dynamics of the slave trade within Africa, “similarity in skin color and other bodily traits, as Europeans viewed them, brought African rulers and merchants no sense of a common African identity with the captives sold.”¹⁴ In fact, sometimes even white outsiders could note the distinct differences: a few centuries later in 1849, archaeologist E.G. Squier visited Nicaragua from the U.S. and wrote that “Nicaraguan blacks differ greatly, physically, from blacks in the United States, they must be from very different regions of Africa. [...] they have few of the characteristics that we consider to be peculiar and universal features of the breed Black.”¹⁵

In the newly-formed societies in the Americas, the Spanish racial ladder designated two people from two regions of Africa that were miles apart, who spoke different languages, who had different physical features, religions, and values as the same, stripping them of all the nuances of their identities.¹⁶ Their cultural differences played another role in their subjugation as well: they oftentimes quashed enslaved peoples’ ability to communicate with each other. Slaveholders saw this means of keeping those they shackled isolated and uninformed as a bonus, as Nicaraguan scholar Sergio Ramírez documents in his book *Tambor Olvidado*, a revisionist history book counteracting antiblackness in Nicaragua’s culture. He writes, “[black people] coming directly from Africa ‘sold’ for a higher price in the market

¹⁴ Franklin, John Hope, "Colonial Slavery," In *From Slavery to Freedom*, 56-67, 7th ed, (New York City, NY: McGraw Hill, 1994), 57.

¹⁵Ramírez, *Tambor Olvidado*, 63.

¹⁶ Ramírez writes, “[For] the [black people] who arrived on the slave ships to the coasts of the Pacific, [...] it was not possible to transmit any visible and systematic trait of common identity other than the color of their skin. Their tongues were multiples, and the tribes or nations from which they came, far from each other” (Ramírez, Sergio, *Tambor Olvidado*, [San José de Costa Rica: Aguilar, 2008], 62).

than those who had already lived in Central America or the Black *ladinos* brought from the peninsula. The price variation was due to the fact that [the people directly from Africa] knew very little or nothing of the language and were frightened and more docile.”¹⁷ This racial reductionism had very real consequences for the subjugated and calculated benefits for the subjugators. Throughout many regions in which human bondage was legal, the law also stipulated that enslaved people could not learn how to read or write.¹⁸ Barred from the media of speech and text, the marginalized were unable to share ideas, feelings, or thoughts with each other.

The title “African” affiliated an array of diverse groups into a monolithic designation, and the way this classification was defined further ensured their oppression. The still-prevailing concept of race is based upon a 1795 model conceived of by German Enlightenment thinker Johann Friedrich Blumenbach.¹⁹ Founded upon his subjective aesthetic preferences among five geographically-based racial categories, Blumenbach set the system up as an phenotype-based hierarchy with Europeans as the pinnacle of beauty.²⁰ The aesthetic quality of race, particularly in the case of Western standards of beauty, is clear when one considers how bigoted cartoons emphasize and ridicule physical traits that differ from the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant ideal.

Acclaimed intellectual Jared Diamond explains that dividing race into visual categories is highly subjective and arbitrary: “there are many different, equally valid procedures for defining races, and those different procedures yield very different classifications. [...] Faced with such differing classifications, many anthropologists today

¹⁷ Ramírez, *Tambor Olvidado*, 63.

¹⁸ Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom*, 57.

¹⁹ Gould, Stephen Jay, "The Geometer of Race," *Discover*, November 1994, 66.

²⁰ Racist caricatures portray Asian people with yellow skin and slit eyes, Jews with exaggeratedly large noses, and the list goes on (particularly in the heinous history of Black iconography produced for white consumers).

conclude that one cannot recognize any human races at all.”²¹ He illustrates these points by constructing different “races” based on shared physical features other than skin color, such as the retention of the enzyme lactase. Once taxonomists select the “divisive criterion” upon which to define categorical borders, they start constructing a “hierarchy of distinctness.”

You start by establishing the most distinct population as a race separate from all other populations. You then separate the most distinct of the remaining populations. You continue by grouping similar populations and separating distinct populations or groups of populations as races or groups of races. The problem is that the extent to which you continue the racial classification is arbitrary, and it’s a decision about which taxonomists disagree passionately. Some taxonomists, the “splitters,” like to recognize many different races [...] Other taxonomists, the “lumpers,” prefer to recognize few races. Which type of taxonomist you are is a matter of personal preference.²²

When does division by difference reach an end point? The lack of consensus among those who construct the categories further enforces the argument that race is based on random subjective markers. Even Blumenbach himself wrote that, "... when the matter is thoroughly considered, you see that all do so run into one another, and that one variety of mankind does so sensibly pass into the other, that you cannot mark out the limits between them."^{23 24}

Distinctions between groups may be primarily based on one feature, but that feature often comes with concordant associations.²⁵ Early “Western” scientific thought centered on blood as the most important and most influential feature of living things not just physically, but in terms of one’s personality, social status, and other features.²⁶ Douglas Starr elaborates

²¹ Diamond, Jared, "Race Without Color," *Discover*, November 1994, 84.

²² *Ibid*, 85.

²³ Gould, "The Geometer of Race," 68.

²⁴ Nicaraguan scholar Sergio Ramírez starts his book with a similar quotation by Don Florencio del Castillo in 1810: “Only one’s opinion can classify those who bring their African origins; and as this varies according to one’s interests and passions, this will be the origin of much discord, which is why I wish that these denominations could be forever extinguished” (Ramírez, *Tambor Olvidado*, 1).

²⁵ Diamond, "Race Without Color," 85.

²⁶ "Four Humors - And there's the humor of it: Shakespeare and the four humors," U.S. National Library of Medicine, Accessed March 17, 2017. <https://www.nlm.nih.gov/exhibition/shakespeare/fourhumors.html>.

on its significant cultural implications in his book *Blood: An Epic History of Medicine and Commerce*:

The descriptive cliché, "the elixir of life," barely touches on the liquid's mystical, religious, and patriotic significance. The Bible mentions blood more than four hundred times: "The life of the flesh is in the blood," says Leviticus, equating blood with life itself. [...] The Egyptians saw blood as the carrier of the vital human spirit, and would bathe in the liquid as a restorative. It is because blood conveyed strength to the Romans that gladiators were said to have drunk the blood of fallen opponents. Doctors from the medieval to the Victorian era assumed blood to have fantastical powers, draining it to remove evil humors, transfusing it to pacify the deranged. Our own culture attaches great value to blood, with the blood of Christ as among the holiest sacraments, blood libel as the most insidious slander, the blood-drinking vampire as the most odious demon.²⁷

"Western" science and society considered the idea that "a person's temperament arises from a balance of four fluids, known as humours" fact since the days of Aristotle.²⁸ Blumenbach's mentor, Carl Linnaeus, assigned a dominant humor to each of the four main racial groups at the time. He postulated that Europeans were ruled by cheerful, sanguine blood; American Indians' choleric yellow bile made them easy to anger; the melancholic black bile of Asians gave them a sad temperament; and that the amount of phlegm in Africans' bodies made them lazy and sluggish.²⁹ Thus, one could make assumptions about a bundle of traits such as skin color, humour, and disposition from the single word "Asian." Labels based upon physical attributes gradually developed many other connotations, most of which were not actually concordant with the main original trait.

The Iberian obsession with race and purity are deeply tangled with the notion of blood. In her book *Genealogical Fictions: Limpieza de Sangre, Religion, and Gender in Colonial México*, Latin American Studies scholar María Elena Martínez traces the history of

²⁷ Starr, Douglas, "Blood: An Epic History of Medicine and Commerce," *The New York Times*. 1998. Accessed March 20, 2017. <http://www.nytimes.com/books/first/s/starr-blood.html>.

²⁸ Gould, "The Geometer of Race," 67.

²⁹ Diamond, "Race Without Color," 85.

limpieza de sangre, or blood purity, back to fifteenth-century Spain.³⁰ The concept arose among the nation's Catholic elites as the distinction between their "pure," "noble" blood versus those of Jews or Muslims, which was "tainted," and "inferior."³¹ In her review of Martínez's scholarship, Carrera summarizes how this Spanish theory of faith-based "blood purity" evolved into a complex hierarchal framework later adapted and translated into the racial caste system of colonial Latin America:

Evolving into a broader discourse, the efficacy of Christian conversion came into question and resulted in the formation of the Holy Office of the Inquisition, which specified beyond doubt who were Old Christians and, thus, who could be members of exclusive ecclesiastic and secular communities. Relying on legal procedures and formulas that traced the genealogies of individuals, this institutionalization promulgated purity of blood statutes in order to produce *probanzas de limpieza de sangre*, certifying credentials that relied upon both official documents—e.g., birth certificates—and depositions from local communal memories of an individual's ancestors. Consequently, the Spanish obsession with blood purity created a myth of a pure Christian Spain and blurred the lines between religious and cultural practices as well as reinforced notions of racial exclusion [...] It framed the emergence of the *sistema de castas*, an entirely New Spanish construct that adapted the ideology of blood purity in order to reify local social categories.³²

The Enlightenment era's fascination with taxonomy and science, the numerous concordant properties associated with blood, Europe's first expeditions and encounters in the "New World," and Spain's obsession with purity and hierarchy all coalesced to construct Latin America's racial categories and systems.

New questions regarding the purity of Spanish blood arose as lineages mixed in new ways in North, Central, and South America. When the Spanish disembarked onto the land of Nicaragua in 1524, they came with horses, disease, and the Bible.³³ But another import they

³⁰ Carrera, Magali, "Review of *Genealogical Fictions: Limpieza de Sangre, Religion, and Gender in Colonial México*," *The American Historical Review* 114, no. 4 (2009): 124. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23883055>.

³¹ Martínez, Maria Elena, *Genealogical Fictions: Limpieza de Sangre, Religion, and Gender in Colonial Mexico*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011).

³² Carrera, "Review of *Genealogical Fictions: Limpieza de Sangre, Religion, and Gender in Colonial México*," 124.

³³ "Nicaragua," *New World Encyclopedia*, Accessed May 01, 2016. http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Nicaragua#Spanish_colonization.

brought with them, one that would forever alter the racial demographics of all of Latin America, were their notions of purity. Although the Iberian-born *conquistadores*, bureaucrats, clerics, and *encomenderos* who first settled in the sixteenth century never accounted for more than five percent of the population occupying the land's modern-day borders, the means of domination and social structure they constructed guaranteed the colonists' position of preeminent power.³⁴ From this position, they subjected indigenous and, later, enslaved African people to exhausting physical labor, emotional trauma, and sexual violence. Historians' estimates place Nicaragua's pre-colonial autochthonous population at around a million, and up to twenty indigenous communities may have called the town of modern-day Masaya home.³⁵ Yet vast numbers of aboriginal peoples perished from disease and abuse in a veritable genocide.³⁶ This tragedy catalyzed another one: the crystallisation of the European-run Trans-Atlantic slave trade as a new source of labor. According to Sergio Ramírez's research of Nicaraguan colonial documentation, the main groups of people kidnapped were, in descending order of population, the *Wolof* peoples originally from Senegal, the *mandingas* of the Mali empire, the *Araras* of Togo and Benin, the *Yoruba* people from Nigeria, the *Congos* from the Zaire river and greater West Africa, the *Angolas* from the *Ndongo* territory, and the *Minas* from the Ivory Coast.³⁷ ³⁸ The nation underwent a stark demographic shift in these years with the annihilation its original inhabitants, the influx of Spanish and African

³⁴ Ramírez, *Tambor Olvidado*, 33.

³⁵ Silva Valle, *Elaboración De Guía De Los Recursos Socio-culturales Del Departamento De Masaya Y La Meseta De Los Pueblos*, 4.

³⁶ However, many indigenous peoples survived and continue to survive today as well. I want to consciously avoid historically situating native people in the past because doing so erases their resilient existence for centuries despite huge obstacles.

³⁷ Ramírez, *Tambor Olvidado*, 8.

³⁸ As noted previously, the complex history of African enslavement in Nicaragua -- the result of the colonial legacies of multiple European powers, including the English and Dutch in addition to the Spanish, -- is beyond the scope of this thesis. But it should be noted that there is a Spanish-speaking racially "Amerindian" majority in Western Nicaragua (my area of focus) and an English-speaking Afro-descendant majority (with a strong presence of several indigenous groups) on the Caribbean Coast. The history, power dynamics, distance, and differences make for a complicated, interesting relationship between the extremely different coasts (especially since the Eastern Nicaragua is now divided into two autonomous regions). Most of the enslaved population of Nicaragua ended up on the Caribbean Coast, but that does not mean that Western Nicaragua was not heavily influenced by Afro-descended peoples.

migrants, and the births of new generations of mixed-race peoples. Under a complex racial categorization system composed by the Spanish, many of these descendants were called *Mestizos*, what one of my interviewees called “the fruits of colonization.”³⁹

Many of the first “encounters” between peoples of different origins were of the sexual kind, and many were nonconsensual. *El Tambor Olvidado* examines Nicaragua’s colonial-era gender dynamics within the racial pyramid, noting that the early colonizers were almost exclusively “single Spanish males” since Europeans had not charted the territory well and considered venturing into it an audacious task only fit for men.⁴⁰ Their country’s law in fact forbade Spanish women from traveling over as a means of preventing prostitution. Indigenous women became the new targets of sexual desire, and the men could exercise unjustly incommensurate power dynamics that led to coercive sexual violence. As Serge Gruzinski writes of the genesis the primary post-colonial mixed-race group of Western Nicaragua,

Rapes, concubines, and, more rarely, marriages generated a new category of population of ambiguous status. It was not clear whether they should be integrated into the Spanish world or the indigenous community. In principle, these half-breeds had no place in a society legally divided into a ‘nation of Indians’ and a ‘nation of Spaniards.’⁴¹

These new generations embodied a contradiction to the strict, absolute racial categories that the Spanish devised, and they could not be ignored. The first documentation Ramírez found of direct slave shipments to Nicaragua was from 1565, about forty years after the Spanish first set foot on the land.⁴² Most of the African people stolen from their families and homeland were men due to their perceived superior physical capacity for hard labor.⁴³

³⁹ Vasquez Rojas, Miguel, Festival organizer, Interview re: Festivals of Masaya/mestizaje in religion, 1 May 2016, Home, Masaya.

⁴⁰ Ramírez, *Tambor Olvidado*, 72.

⁴¹ Gruzinski, Serge, *The Mestizo Mind: The Intellectual Dynamics of Colonization and Globalization*, (New York: Routledge, 2002), 42.

⁴² Ramírez, Sergio. *Tambor Olvidado*. San José de Costa Rica: Aguilar, 2008: 73.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 75.

Yet African women often bore the struggle of equally-demanding labor in terms of both pregnancy and producing cash crops. Slavery also broke up families within the Americas with the constant threat of being sold away. Sexual relationships between Black, indigenous, Spanish, and mixed people created a burgeoning, ever-more-fused class of multiraciality as decades passed. Generations of mixed-race peoples, living destabilizers to the social hierarchy, soon constituted a new majority by the end of the seventeenth century, and by 1820, they represented eighty-five percent of Nicaragua's population.

The English translation of *mestizaje* is the pejorative word "miscegenation."⁴⁴ Etymologically speaking, American journalist David Goodman Croly coined the word in 1864 by combining part of the Latin words "*misce(re)*," meaning "to mix," with the biological term "*gen(us)*."⁴⁵ All humans belong to the "*genus*" *Homo* and, more specifically, the species *sapien*, yet the scientific connotations surrounding Croly's word choice emphasize the false historical notions of the era.⁴⁶ Physiologically, Europeans conceived of racial groups as irreconcilably different and postulated that multiracial children were fundamentally unnatural. "Miscegenation" first appeared in a Civil War-era pamphlet, supposedly produced by anti-slavery Republicans, that advocated for racial mixing between white and Black people. However, later elucidations proved that it was a propaganda hoax by the Democratic party sought to alienate would-be supporters of emancipation by equating the

⁴⁴ Although much of the following paragraph is specific to the United States, the concepts carried similar negative undertones in Latin America's chapters of conquest and colonization. Since I am writing this thesis in English and some readers may not know Spanish well, I think these linguistic comparisons are valuable as long as we acknowledge that the examples from the U.S. are deployed as similes rather than metaphors (that is, I describe something by comparing it with another similar thing rather than by replacing it directly). The language barrier can be formidable not just in terms of direct vocabulary translations, but also with historical implications and cultural connotations. I also think that as long as we pay careful attention to the different contexts of Nicaragua and the U.S. and try to never draw parallels which are not there, it is worthwhile to note similarities in attitudes towards multiraciality across regions colonized by Europe in which fundamentals tenets of science and society were rooted in the idea of white supremacy.

⁴⁵ "Miscegenation," Dictionary.com, Accessed March 24, 2017.
<http://www.dictionary.com/browse/miscegenation>.

⁴⁶ "The Miscegenation Hoax," Museum of Hoaxes, Accessed March 24, 2017.
http://hoaxes.org/archive/permalink/the_miscegenation_hoax/.

cause with the then-horrifying idea of a society in which interracial relationships were encouraged.⁴⁷ The meaning behind “miscegenation” was specifically designed to have unfavorable connotations and elicit shock, both defining and condemning in one linguistic invention. In English, mixed breed dogs can be called “mongrels,” “mutts,” or “curs,” all of which have pejorative connotations when applied to a human. These insults imply that the traits concordant with multiraciality include inferior intelligence, attractiveness, and refinement in comparison to traits inherited from “pure” ancestry. However, the taxonomy of “purebred” domesticated dog breeds is unnatural, artificially created by humans through centuries of selective breeding rather than through natural selection.⁴⁸

New colonial societies at first viewed mixed-race people with derision, horrified fascination, and fear.⁴⁹ Understood as half-breeds, the Spanish at first conceived of them as “a mix of different species of animals. By implication, it was a trespass of the order of nature: if Spaniards defined ‘pure’ or ‘noble’ blood as good, then they considered its dilution, or loss of purity via mixing, undesirable.”⁵⁰ The scornful, racist claims and symbolism in this 1852 quotation by German traveler Wilfred Marr illustrates the extent of the degree of difference thought to exist between the human races: “the Nicaraguan *zambo* [one of the many terms coined to define a multiracial person] is a degenerated human being, formed of one-third tiger, one-third monkey, and one-third pig.”⁵¹ To Marr, their union within an individual was shockingly and sickeningly unnatural. This was another case of inverted understanding of representation as reality: what was unnatural was the notion that races were separate animals.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Coren, Stanley, "How Dogs Were Created," *Modern Dog Magazine*, Accessed March 24, 2017, <http://moderndogmagazine.com/articles/how-dogs-were-created/12679>.

⁴⁹ For further reading on critical race theory and *blanqueamiento* in colonial Latin America, read Ruth Hill’s article “Categories and Crossings: Critical Race Studies and the Spanish World.”

⁵⁰ Leibsohn, Dana, and Barbara Mundy, "Surveying Mestizaje," *Surveying Mestizaje*, 2005, Accessed April 16, 2016. http://www.smith.edu/vistas/vistas_web/units/surv_mestizaje.htm.

⁵¹ Ramírez, *Tambor Olvidado*, 84.

Mestizx people thus simultaneously disproved the logic behind the Western paradigm of race and were able to evade it. The existence of *mestizxs* proved that *all* of the races from which they came were human: European societies, which generally saw themselves as grossly more superior and advanced than the rest of the world, had to confront the fact that those who they described as savage and barbaric were not as different as they were portrayed. *Mestizx* existence blurred racial lines of the Spanish's clear-cut, supposedly immutable, stable, and insurmountable designations of monoracality upon which their scientific, economic, and social systems were based.

The Europeans' capitalist system fomented the age of exploration, colonization, Triangular Trade, and chattel slavery which rendered all Black people property. One tenet of implementing capitalism is to assign value and meaning to everything the beholder can identify.⁵² As seen through slavery, one part of this procedure is determining a body's worth and significance; this recognition marks the body as subject to the dominant power. Yet, in order for bodies to be assigned meanings, they must first be identified as such. Thus, bodies that are not recognized by the categories of the social hierarchy are able to elude it. At this time, since the system did not recognize the mixed-race body which disrupted the foundation of its structure, the body was not enough of a body to be acknowledged and contained by the colonizers' identification.⁵³ Thus, although excluded from the "legally divided [...] 'nation of Indians' and 'nation of Spaniards,'" this positionality granted *Mestizxs* a special ability.⁵⁴ The fact that the system did not account for them meant that they were immune from all societal norms and thus able to nimbly jump between each of their identities when it was most advantageous. They existed with a fluidity that let them to selectively take advantage of all

⁵² Gil, Jose, "Paradoxical Body," *TDR: The Drama Review* 50:4 (2006), 24.

⁵³ Ibid, 31.

⁵⁴ Gruzinski, *The Mestizo Mind*, 42.

the constituting races' privileges and escape their restrictions.⁵⁵

However, this freedom was temporal. The disorder made the Spanish uncomfortable, and once they realized that the multiracial population were normal people, here to stay and starting to constitute a large portion of the population (eventually 85%), they adapted their system accordingly. The Catholic Church's registration books began classifying between the Spanish from Spain (*Españoles*) and those born in the Americas (*Criollos*), the indigenous *Indios*, African *Negros*, and the *castas* (directly translated to mean "castes"), which referred to individuals of multiracial ancestry.⁵⁶ *Castas* branched off into specific subcategories that grew in number as the population of Latin America became increasingly mixed. One of the best examples supporting the pertinence of aesthetic perception in determining race is an art genre known as *castas* paintings. Latin American Studies scholar Christa Olson details that these pieces, popular between 1711 and 1790, illustrate and name:

hierarchies of miscegenation among the colony's three main "racial" groups (Africans, Europeans, and Indians). Generally, *casta* paintings appear in a series of 12 to 16 images, presented either as separate panels or as a grid of images on a single panel. Each *casta* image depicts a family: a mother, a father, and one or two children. Each set of parents represents a different combination of racial groups or castes. The children resulting from those relationships bear the caste name that forms the title of the painting. [...] The top row depicts Spanish-Indigenous relationships; the middle row shows Spanish-African partners; the bottom row features African-Indigenous couples.⁵⁷

These visual representations of race once again applied Spanish logic and order on the colonial power's subjects. Usually painted by *criollo* artists for visitors from Spain, they could serve both as a novelty souvenir for inhabitants of the "Old World" and as a visual aid for the indoctrination of racial nomenclature.⁵⁸ They described the growing mixed-race

⁵⁵ Ramírez, *Tambor Olvidado*, 81.

⁵⁶ Olson, Christa, "Casta Painting and the Rhetorical Body," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 39, no. 4 (2009), 311. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40647265>.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 318.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 321.

population as if they were recipes, with fractions and ingredients. If a Spanish man and indigenous woman had a son, he was fit the label *mestizo*. If a Spanish man and Black woman had a daughter, she was called *mulatta*. And if that daughter had a child with a Spanish man, their offspring was labelled a “quadroon,” signifying “a quarter Black.” Yet reality circumvented these attempted visual explanations of identity: no matter how much they expanded the number of categories, they could never capture the full, nuanced gamut of mixed-race lineage and identity.

The amended racial spectrum that the Spanish constructed created still placed whiteness as the favorable end. It also perpetuated the false concept of racial purity in which one end is 100% white and the other is 100% Black. Science has proven to us that we are all mixed since humans have been migrating, procreating, and evolving for centuries.⁵⁹ There is no such thing as actual monoraciality or our notions of race at all. Even if monoraciality were a reality, it also fails to account for more complex backgrounds such as someone with what society considers Black, indigenous, and white ancestry: even though a spectrum is more flexible than a binary, it is still anchored between two opposite poles. Finally, it also lacks dimension to account for other layers of identity such as phenotypical appearance, ethnicity, nationality, genetics, and personal affiliation. No system based on massive categorizations could ever truly account for reality, which Gruzinski, evoking Deleuze and Guattari, postulates is “a perpetual movement of amorphous clusters.”⁶⁰ Such classifications, which are relatively arbitrary, “incite us to separate what cannot be separated and overlook phenomena that straddle the standard divide.”⁶¹

In exploring how these issues relate to my project on the folkloric traditions of Masaya, I have found José Muñoz’s work to be extremely helpful. In his book

⁵⁹ Gannon, "Race Is a Social Construct, Scientists Argue," 1.

⁶⁰ Gruzinski, *The Mestizo Mind*, 44.

⁶¹ Gruzinski, *The Mestizo Mind*, 42.

Disidentifications, Muñoz offers the concept named in his title as a survival technique for people of marginalized identities. “Disidentifying,” or “situat[ing] oneself both within and against the various discourses through which one is called to identify,” serves as an alternative to identifying or counteridentifying.⁶² It is a means of living one’s truthful, unfixed, shifting identity despite formidable static societal conventions. Through his experiences with race and queerness, Muñoz’s articulates the unique practices and abilities exercised by those situated “in-between:”

Disidentification is about recycling and rethinking encoded meaning. This process [...] scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message’s universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications. Thus, disidentification is a step further than cracking open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture.

The innovative act of “scrambling” to create brings together that which was, that which could be, and that which is in one--- the old, new, and possible. When they do adopt certain aspects of existing systems, “minoritarian identities” take these symbols of “encoded meaning” (not necessarily words) and breathe new life into them, sometimes even transforming them so that they are actually subverting the system of power from which they originally came. These disidentifications give access to “worldmaking,” the ability to construct a new space for oneself and one’s culture. In this breathing, shifting space, “minoritarian identities” no longer must straddle disparate ideologies; instead, they have something new, something of their own, something that accounts for and affirms all, and not just part, of their identities. In a spirit of subversion, these individuals typically start their disruption with seemingly mundane acts that may grow dramatic or catch on among other “minoritarian” people. This group’s disidentifications can eventually form a culture of its

⁶² Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 161.

own through collective “worldmaking,” generating a space and culture of their own.

Section 2:
Masaya Case Study
Introduction

This case study will illustrate just how the disidentificatory acts of which Muñoz speaks, as well as other *mestizx* processes, can not only innovatively generate cultural traditions, but help preserve them through change. The section will also expand upon the effects of the history of racial formation in a contemporary setting, the town known as the “Cradle of Nicaraguan Folklore.”⁶³

“Folklore,” “culture,” “tradition,” “artisanship,” “the vernacular:” we use these nouns to (unrealistically, yet more easily) describe semi-stable processes enacted by shifting beings aligned in fluctuating groups. All the aforementioned terms center around what Diana Taylor, in her seminal work, *The Archive and The Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, calls “vital acts of transfer” which comprise “the repertoire.” She elaborates on the “so-called ephemeral repertoire of embodied practice/knowledge (i.e., spoken language, dance, sports, ritual)” in conversation with “the archive,” composed of “supposedly enduring materials (i.e., texts, documents, buildings, bones).”⁶⁴ The two terms, though both equally valid modes of cultural transmission, have been historically pitted against each other in a binary model. In Nicaragua’s history, Spanish Enlightenment-era colonists exalted the archive, especially written literature, as the superior, more legitimate cultural medium. As one of my interviewees stated, these colonists simultaneously disparaged indigenous and African repertoire traditions as primitive and backwards while destroying what material culture the marginalized groups did have.⁶⁵ This twofold action was a means of attaining

⁶³ “Masaya” Text Mural can be found at Appendix A.

⁶⁴ Taylor, Diana, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 19.

⁶⁵ Vargas Guzman, Santiago, Lawyer/notary public, Interview re: Mestizaje in festivals/myths and legends, 28

power. By belittling and razing what intangible and tangible culture they could, the Spanish tried to force indigenous and Afro-descendant people to assimilate by leaving no appealing alternatives to adopt.

During my time in Masaya, Nicaragua in Spring 2016, it was very challenging for me to find concrete aspects of material culture to research. Yet there were parts of Nicaragua's indigenous American & African cultures that escaped eradication. These impalpable elements endured in people's minds, bodies, and souls through oral myths and legends, music, dances, food, practices of artisanship, and more. Barre Toelken defines

tradition [as] not some static, immutable force from the past, but those pre-existing culture-specific materials and options that bear upon the performer more heavily than do his or her own personal tastes and talents. [...] in the processing of these contents and styles in performance, the artist's own unique talents of inventiveness within the tradition are highly valued and are expected to operate strongly. [...] Folklore is made up of informal expressions passed around long enough to have become recurrent in form and context, but changeable in performance.⁶⁶

As Spanish, aboriginal, and African peoples increasingly mixed, their customs did as well. These acts form a living culture intricately tied to the bodies that practice it rather than solely objects. They rely on reenactment and interactivity, deepening community bonds and encouraging the culture's longevity. However, as Toelken expounds, anything lasting over time is subject to change. As each generation enacts their inherited traditions, they add their own life's context to the culture, furthering the fused nature of *mestizaje*.

In Masaya, homeland to an indigenous group known by the names Chorotega, Mangué, and Monimbó, new mixed-race generations as well as their "monoracial"-identifying relatives all became active contributors to the constant process of *Mestizaje* that transformed the region's dominant culture.⁶⁷ The living, syncretized traditions that arose from

April 2016, Law office, Masaya.

⁶⁶ Toelken, Barre, *The Dynamics of Folklore*, (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 1996), 7.

⁶⁷ Silva Valle, Maria Jose Ocarina, *Elaboración De Guía De Los Recursos Socio-Culturales Del Departamento De Masaya Y La Meseta De Los Pueblos*, (Universidad Americana UAM, Facultad De Administración Turística Y Hotelera, June 2003. Accessed April 16, 2016.

the collision of indigenous, Spanish, and African peoples reflect this history of imposition and subversion that produced the *Mestizxs*.

In this investigation, I explore the concept and discuss the history of *mestizaje* as a generative process of change which activates a specific state of being in individual identities as well as modifies or forms a culture in the face of restrictive existing paradigms. Change is natural and inevitable, but the manners in which it occurs can greatly vary. One such way is by convergence, in which multiple elements come together. This can occur as violently as a car crash, as was the case with Spanish imposition in modern-day Nicaragua, or as peacefully as the mixing of coffee with cream, like when a Chinese man and his Vietnamese friend celebrate Lunar New Year together by enacting their respective cultural customs. These exchanges, if enough people employ them often enough, build a new culture influenced by the constitutive cultures contributing to it as well as the nature of their confluence. Identities that engage with this nascent social web will feel their roles shift in the new context, perhaps leaping in to join eagerly, perhaps condemning it, or perhaps adopting certain traits and rejecting others. My project records the history and constant generative process of *mestizaje* and resulting *mestizx* culture of Masaya's specific folkloric culture and how these influences combine to form Masaya's *mestizx* identity.

Methodology & Researcher's Lens

I selected Masaya, Nicaragua as the site in which to pursue my research question, “how can we see the identity formation of *Mestizx* people, historically and personally, through art, food, holidays, dance, and music?” Whenever I expressed this area of interest, countless Nicaraguan people referred me to the “cradle of Nicaraguan folklore,” home of multiple UNESCO-recognized cultural treasures, and the hub of the country’s artisanship scene.⁶⁸ Over my four weeks in Masaya during April 2016, I conducted ten interviews and three participant observations.

Although my personal ethnocultural heritage and context of identity formation are quite different from those of most of those I interviewed, I found myself relating to some of their sentiments. Multiracial people- even if they have no shared heritage- can often connect over many shared experiences in ways that they cannot connect to monoracial individuals with whom they do share heritage. For example, several of my interviewees expressed that although they are *Mestizxs*, they gained the most confidence in their identities by revitalizing their indigenous roots. Thus, they relate more to one side, although they do not negate the other parts of their ancestry. Similarly, I strongly identify as a Taiwanese American, yet acknowledge that my mother’s heritage is part of my own as well. Although I never mentioned my ethnic background with those I interviewed, my personal experiences gave me a more nuanced understanding of concepts of mixed-race and culture since they are themes I have had to consider for my whole life.

But while I could relate to numerous similarities between me and those with whom I spoke, there were many more differences. I am not *Mestiza*, and I am not Nicaraguan. Masaya’s racial history and demographics render it an environment that highly contrasts from

⁶⁸ To view a mural of Masaya sights, refer to Appendix B.

my own context, and I cannot pretend to understand most parts of *Mestizaje* on a personal level.

According to a 2013 census, 69% of Nicaraguan residents identified as *Mestizx* as defined as “Amerindian and white.”⁶⁹ The vast majority these people would have to trace back many generations to find their first “monoracial” ancestors. And many of these unions, usually between Spanish *conquistadores* and women of color, were nonconsensual, one tragically common example of European colonization. The Spanish with the strongest links to Spain topped the social order and *Mestizxs* were seen as lesser due to their mixed blood, and yet dramatic population shifts wrested careful control of racial power dynamics from the hands of the Spanish. Even after aboriginal groups were obliterated- even after enslaved Africans mostly remained on the Caribbean Coast- even after numbers of the Spanish population stabilized and stagnated, numbers of *Mestizxs* kept multiplying. Enough of a *Mestizx* presence existed for them to have children with each other as well as with people of the other aforementioned groups, furthering the process of *mestizaje* and producing a *Mestizx* majority. These multitudes had power in numbers; their existence precipitated chaos and contradicted core tenets of society, and yet their huge populace mandated that they be acknowledged. In present-day Masaya, *Mestizx* race and culture dominate.

Compared to most *Mestizx* people in Masaya, the lineage of my mixing is very direct: I am first-generation, fifty percent Asian and fifty percent white. The process that led to me being born was my parents falling in love rather than an exhaustive operation of imposed sexual subjugation. The power dynamic constructed during colonization led to the birth of a whole new race that now dominates the region, where complex lineages are common and concepts of racial categories deviate far from the modern U.S. model. In North America, I am a child of a fairly rare union in my society and feel isolated as one of a handful of mixed

⁶⁹ "The World Factbook: Nicaragua," Central Intelligence Agency, Accessed May 02, 2016. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/nu.html>.

children I know, invisibilized in the country's popular narratives, and pressured to choose one identity to adhere to conventional absolutist categories. In the U.S., while most members of society are "monoracial," my four-person family contains three distinct racial identities. Meanwhile in Masaya, a majority of society is of mixed ancestry while most families are composed of more homogeneously blended demographics.

It was very important for me to critically and consciously distinguish the many factors of my experiences with multicultural identities with those that I heard in Masaya. These connections and contrasts enhanced the development of my project as they fostered deeper analysis, nuance, and comprehension.

My advisor, Nicaraguan musician Maria Jose Ocarina Silva Valle, connected me to most of the interviewees using knowledge of her hometown as well as experience from conducting her own cultural research on the city. Two of my interviews were with people I met my own through interacting with them in daily life in Masaya. I conducted these two interviews towards the end of my investigation when I realized that relying solely on people who my advisor knew could create biases in my results, heavily favoring more formally educated people with cultural specializations.

Other biases influenced my results, the most significant one being the lacuna of self-identified racially Black interviewees. This lack of representation is my research's biggest weakness. As seen in this project, antiblackness is a problem in Nicaragua (and most other places), and I think that having someone's firsthand experiences would enhance my understanding and the cultural analyses I discuss in my thesis. Although I asked my advisor several times if she could connect me with Afro-descendant cultural practitioners who heavily identified with their Black lineage, she had a lot of trouble finding anyone. It is true that Masaya's racial demographics does not have high numbers of self-identified Black/Afro-descendant people (which may be because of internalized antiblackness), but I truly wish I

could have heard some of their perspectives. However, I did hear from a few mixed-race people who, upon me asking how they identified racially, noted African heritage in distant generations, although they did not experience life as someone perceived as phenotypically Black.

I also recognize that my study is limited in terms of age, as the responses I acquired are from older interviewees, ranging from ages thirty-three to eighty-two, with the majority in their sixties. This age bias is unfortunate since younger perspectives would have been very valuable in my research on cultural changes today, most of which are arising from younger generations. I was limited by time, however, since this theme in my topic became evident only after I had returned to Managua. I wholeheartedly acknowledge that this is an unheard perspective. My interviews were with an equal number of men and women, five of each gender, although my conversations with the men tended to go more in-depth because some of the women with whom I spoke had time commitments and had to leave earlier.

Throughout my in-depth interviews, I tailored my list of questions according to the speaker's cultural specialty, which ranged from patron saint festival organizing to *marimba* making. I also had several questions that I asked to each interviewee regarding personal identity, the culture of *Mestizaje*, and their thoughts on Masaya. Examples include: "How do you identify racially and culturally?" "What does *el mestizaje* mean to you?" "Why do you think Masaya is recognized as 'the birthplace of Nicaraguan folklore?" I also took precautions so that my research was conducted ethically, giving my interviewee all the information they needed to consent. Before we began our conversation, I would introduce myself as a student and the nature of my project, ask for permission for their answers to be recorded, and inform them that I would be changing their names in my paper so that their responses remained anonymous. For each session, which usually lasted between forty-five minutes to an hour and a half, I used a voice recorder and took supplementary notes in my

journal to document responses and my related thoughts. I conducted all of the interviews and read several sources in Spanish, and all the translations are my own. Although my competency is very high, I am not a native or fluent speaker, so I may have missed some cultural connotations and rapidly spoken or semantically complex responses.

I gleaned the rest of research information from three participant observations, pertinent literature, and grounded theory. My participant observations took place in a leatherworking workshop, a hat maker's workshop and a folklore performance, and in these settings, I was able to observe mostly younger people whose input I lack in interviews, although the observations in no way substitute for an interview. During my initial research period at the beginning of this project, I read a few texts to gain theoretical and historical knowledge that allowed me to conduct my research and analysis in a more informed fashion. I used the notes I gathered from the literature, my interviews and observations, and from a few events earlier in my semester abroad to perform grounded theory. This method allowed me to review my collected information for key concepts, organize and code recurring themes, and thoroughly analyze my findings.

The Independent Study Project I produced was strong, but since it was the product of only one month's work of research and writing, I knew it could've gone much deeper. I was proud of my work, but I also knew I could've taken it so much further had I had the time. Upon returning to Emory, I was excited to learn that I could base my senior project for my Interdisciplinary Studies major on my ISP. I now had time to do in-depth secondary source research to better ground my claims and dive deeper into theory, analysis, and history. I am happy that I conducted field research first and followed with secondary source investigation because my ideas and arguments formed from what my interviewees told me. Had I researched the other way, I may have been more tempted to fall into confirmation bias of my already-existing notions rather than listening to subjects' responses.

Finally, I have tried to be very wary of my positionality in all of this. I am an extremely privileged person who lived in a town for only four weeks and is attempting to speak knowledgably about its culture. I am an outsider trying to study traditions which possess special depth that only insiders can understand. I am not a neutral, objective narrator. My personal background context may mean that I completely missed important ideas or made up others which aren't really there. My presence was outside the ordinary, so even when I tried to be a silent fly-on-the-wall observer, I still impacted what I observed. I participated in Western-academia-voyeurism as a citizen of an imperial power visiting a post-colonial nation. I believe that these complicated dynamics should be at the forefront of our minds when reading cultural studies by outsiders like me and never fall into the trap of simplifying complicated situations. To try to do better within this tradition and history, we must be humble, admit our mistakes, say sorry, and do better.

Research Findings

On Identity

Many families in Nicaragua start Sundays with a traditional *nacatamal*, bread, and coffee for breakfast. In one of her class lectures, Dora Maria Tellez employed the *nacatamal* as a symbol of Nicaragua's *Mestizaje* and the cultures that have influenced the country's racial identities. One of the dish's fundamental ingredients is the plantain leaves in which it is encased as it cooks over a wood fire. Plantains, originally from Africa, were introduced to Latin America from European slave ships. Pigs, and thus pork, also first came to Nicaragua by way of the Columbian exchange. This meat makes up the hearty center of the *nacatamal*. Most of the dish is *masa*, a hearty corn-based filling made of *maíz*, a staple crop native to this land.

These three ingredients unify to create a distinctly Nicaraguan food, representing the origins of *Mestizx* culture. But the *nacatamal* is more than the sum of leaves, pork, and corn; it is an original food that cannot be described as only ingredients, but a whole meal. Tellez defined this phenomenon as "syncretism," a complete mix in which components cannot be disassociated.⁷⁰

Today, the majority of people in Nicaragua identify as *Mestizx*, which is understood as its own race and culture grounded in the legacy of conquest. When asked to name their identities, all of my participants referred to themselves as *Mestizo* or *Mestiza*. But a few of them gave caveats: two participants noted that they also had Lebanese heritage as well, and two others stated that although they acknowledge that they have mixed ancestry, they identify

⁷⁰ Tellez, Dora Maria. "La Colonización Con Su Sincretismo Cultural Y El Mestizaje- Identidades Sin Definición." Lecture, *Rewriting Nicaragua: Literacy, Rights, and Social Change*, Nicaragua, Managua, February 24, 2016.

more as indigenous.⁷¹ These two men, Jorge and Antonio, cited that living in or near the indigenous Chorotega neighborhood of Monimbó fostered this deep personal connection.⁷²

When I first arrived in Masaya, everyone directed me to this part of town upon hearing my investigation topic. At first I was confused: my project is on *mestizx* cultures, not those of indigenous groups. But through my interviews, I learned that this part of Masaya has a vital role in the formation of the town's *mestizx* heritage. Having a strong, living link to their ancestor's town and traditions reminds them of where they came from. My research has taught me that Monimbó's indigenous traditions and Masaya's *Mestizx* culture greatly overlap. The Chorotega customs that still live on today were not immune to the process of *Mestizaje*—the fact that they have endured for so many centuries means that they were subject to great change. That which survives does so because it is adaptable. The errors in my initial assumptions were assuming that “fully” aboriginal people still practice a more ancient, “pure” form of indigenous traditions while more mixed *Mestizxs* have a newer culture that was produced through the process of conquest and colonization. The truth is that perceived racial phenotypes and actual cultural traditions do not always align, and that “purity” is an oppressive myth.

As young musician Jimena Sandoval told me, “there are almost no perfectly pure indigenous people left. We are all mixed, even if only a little. No one in the world is ‘pure.’”⁷³ With this statement, she makes a few important postulations. First, the concept of racial “purity” is an illusion: humans procreated for many years before the racial definitions

⁷¹ Lopez Salazar, Leticia. Dance teacher/vendor at Artisan Market. Interview re: Dances of Masaya/traditional clothing. 12 April 2016. Artisan Market. Masaya.

Sandoval, Jimena. Musician. Interview re: Indigenous-Mestizo relations. 3 May 2016. Home of a friend. Managua.

⁷² Villa Perez, Jorge. Marimba maker/musician. Interview re: *Mestizaje* in music/artisanship. 8 April 2016. Home. Monimbó.

Romero Rodriguez, Antonio. Businessman/musician. Interview re: Güegüensese/African influence in Masaya. 1 May 2016. Home. Masaya.

⁷³ Sandoval, Jimena. Musician. Interview re: Indigenous-Mestizo relations. 3 May 2016. Home of a friend. Managua.

used to categorize modern populations even existed. Second, there is a sort of gamut of mixedness, and even those perceived as “monoracial” are somewhere on that continuum. This dispels the idea that the concept of racial amalgamation results in homogeneity. There are nuances in these fusions that distinguish them from other combinations. The oppressive notion of “purity” also favors certain races over others and posits that mixing devalues the superior blood. So while there are certainly people in Monimbó who have more indigenous lineage than others in Masaya, no one is solely indigenous, as is the case with any “race.” Many of the aboriginal practices carried on in this old Chorotega town are, in fact, examples of the type of *Mestizaje* I seek to study, with strong remnants of the cultural collision of Spanish imposition and African and indigenous subjugation. No long-lived culture can exist in isolation, “purity,” and permanence as it interacts horizontally with other groups and is vertically carried down through the ages by different generations. It seems that in this stage of the 21st century in larger Nicaragua, more indigenous-identifying people habituate customs from the early days of Latin American *Mestizaje* than do *Mestizx*-identifying people, who generally participate in the modern *mestizaje* process of globalization.

In my findings, the enactment of cultural traditions is a major factor in the construction of Masaya’s interpersonal, collective *Mestizx* community. As one of my interviewees adamantly declared, “*Mestizxs* need to learn their histories, both the good and the bad, to know who they are.”⁷⁴ They need a real, full, meaningful understanding of who they are, not just a simple, convenient representation that oppresses through omission. Through enacting the folkloric customs of their ancestors to learn where they came from and in turn, adding their own styles and collaboratively connecting with other cultural practitioners to contribute who they are to this living history, *mestizxs* in Masaya are both inheriting and modifying their identities and culture in an ongoing process of *mestizaje*.

⁷⁴ Vargas Guzman, Santiago. Lawyer/notary public. Interview re: *Mestizaje* in festivals/myths and legends. 28 April 2016. Law office. Masaya.

In the following subsections, I will use what I learned from my conversations with local experts on how *mestizaje* manifests in specific folkloric repertoire of Masaya. Starting with *El Güegüense*, a multidisciplinary work, I will move on to examine music, artisanship, dance and costumes, attitudes towards tradition and change, food, and religion and patron saint festivals.

El Güegüense

Penned in Masaya by an unknown author in the 16th century, *El Güegüense* (also known as *El Macho Ratón*) is a satirical multidisciplinary work that combines theater, dance, and music to defiantly ridicule Spanish imposition. Since its birth in Masaya, the work traveled to nearby municipality Diriamba by way of commercial exchanges which facilitated concurrent cultural exchange. The town latched onto *El Güegüense* and developed their own techniques of performance in a process of *mestizaje*, invigorating the play with new audiences, performers, and styles.⁷⁵ Meanwhile in Masaya, the tradition of *El Güegüense* slowly faded over generations due to lack of cultural maintenance. In recent years, it is rarely performed. Dance teacher and seamstress Leticia told me about occasional attempts at cultural restoration: artists perform excerpts of dances or scenes and students study the texts in Masaya's school curricula, but Diriamba is now known as the home of *El Güegüense*. As a traditional folkloric dance teacher and Artisan Market vendor whose life's work is based on and dedicated to her culture, this fact saddened her: "We have to preserve parts of our culture like this. They are important to who we are, and we cannot lose them."⁷⁶

The script, which my interviewee Santiago called a "tangible treasure of the spirit of

⁷⁵ Romero Rodriguez, Antonio. Businessman/musician. Interview re: Güegüense/African influence in Masaya. 1 May 2016. Home. Masaya.

⁷⁶ Lopez Salazar, Leticia. Dance teacher/vendor at Artisan Market. Interview re: Dances of Masaya/traditional clothing. 12 April 2016. Artisan Market. Masaya.

rebellion,” was written in an amalgamation of the indigenous language Nahautl with Castilian Spanish.⁷⁷ This dialect is distinctly *Mestizx*.⁷⁸ Many people, including Masaya residents Leticia and Antonio, speculate that the author was *Mestizx* since most indigenous people were never taught the Roman alphabet and since it is dubious that a Spanish person would write a work so offensive towards their own identity.⁷⁹

The *Güegüense*, the work’s protagonist, is a clever, bold *Mestizo* man who employs negative tropes, such as the idea that indigenous blood is imbued with inferiority and stupidity, to his own advantage. Over the course of the play, he fools Spanish Governor Tastuanes into marrying his daughter off to the *Güegüense*’s adopted son by subversively playing into stereotypes. He pretends to misunderstand the oppressor, leading Tastuanes to underestimate the *Mestizo* trickster and accidentally “give” his precious daughter, substantial riches, and respected family name to the *Güegüense*.⁸⁰

This archetypal character gave name to what is called a “spirit of *Güegüense*,” which reminds authority that there are people who can exist outside of a prevailing system, seizing power by exposing its flaws and acting as an identity that cannot be contained. This a distinctly Nicaraguan *Mestizx* state of being allows one to act with the privileges or consequences of both or neither and constantly disidentify, generating new spaces of interaction, ideas, and identity. Yet in forging the new, the act of disidentifying can also sustain the old by adapting and reinvigorating parts of culture that might not otherwise survive the inevitable changes of time. The main traits of the rebellious “spirit of *Güegüense*”

⁷⁷ For further reading on mixed language theater produced during the colonial period by post-conquest indigenous and *mestizx* authors, read *Aztecs on Stage: Religious Theater in Colonial Mexico* by Louise Burkhart.

⁷⁸ Vargas Guzman, Santiago. Lawyer/notary public. Interview re: Mestizaje in festivals/myths and legends. 28 April 2016. Law office. Masaya.

⁷⁹ Romero Rodriguez, Antonio. Businessman/musician. Interview re: *Güegüense*/African influence in Masaya. 1 May 2016. Home. Masaya.

Lopez Salazar, Leticia. Dance teacher/vendor at Artisan Market. Interview re: Dances of Masaya/traditional clothing. 12 April 2016. Artisan Market. Masaya.

⁸⁰ Vasquez Rojas, Miguel. Festival organizer. Interview re: Festivals of Masaya/mestizaje in religion. 1 May 2016. Home. Masaya.

include using humor and semantic double meaning as indirect ways to criticize and ridicule something under the pretext of the joke or misunderstanding. Antonio, a local folkloric musician, extrapolated on this undeniably *Mestizx* state of being as “a natural resource to deal with oppression which Nicaraguans have been using against authority all throughout history.”⁸¹

The linguistic acrobatics performed by those with a “spirit of *Güegüense*” are also known as “signifying,” which esteemed race scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr. asserts is a “function to redress an imbalance of power.”⁸² Signifying is an oppressed peoples’ tool: instead of using physical force or articulating their direct thoughts, this mode of communication is coded and subversive, utilizing figures of speech such as double entendre, wordplay, and inside jokes to indirectly say what they really mean.⁸³ It serves to construct a private sonic community which only certain audiences can access as the signifier circumvents dominant groups’ surveillance. Speakers are able to do so by employing exclusive semantics, granting them a liberty they usually are not afforded: to freely express criticism, frustration, ridicule, and other reactions to marginalization. This circumlocution comes with a safety mechanism: since signifying is roundabout communication, those who do not know the specific connotations or register are oblivious to other meanings. And even if they do realize the layered message, the signifiers can claim innocence by pretending that they really meant the literal meaning and nothing more. Although dominant powers sometimes discover the true messages, the innovative and adaptable marginalized communities always one step ahead, continually inventing new covert expressions and disregarding authority’s attempts to

⁸¹ Romero Rodriguez, Antonio. Businessman/musician. Interview re: *Güegüense*/African influence in Masaya. 1 May 2016. Home. Masaya.

⁸² Gates, Henry Louis, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 14.

⁸³ Perry, Imani, “Stinging Like Tabasco,” *Prophets of the Hood*, (Durham: Duke UP, 2004), 66.

stifle them. Even in these instances, the subjugated can still communicate freely, although not openly, by generating renewed, exclusive semantic depth.

The act of signifying allows one to renegotiate power since “power[...] [was] developed in several dimensions [in] which the equilibria were obtained through a variety of transactions.”⁸⁴ Like everything in the world, power is heterogeneous and can undergo great change not just through signifying, but through a variety of negotiations. By conceiving of the dynamics of the relationship between the many racial groups as one in which power is fluid and never completely constant, we start to consider the ways in which the dominant Spanish and mixed people both simultaneously maintained and negotiated power with one another in order to assert control over the most subjugated individuals in society: those designated as Black or indigenous. In the pursuit of the power and capital associated with whiteness, many *mestizxs* completely forgot about or actively denied their native and/or African heritage in a saddening legacy of antiblackness.

Music

The *marimba de arco* is the most well-recognized instrument of Nicaraguan folkloric music. Still handcrafted in Monimbó by Chorotega-descended peoples, Sergio Ramírez writes about the instrument at length in his book which attempts to redress the erasure of Black cultural contributions to Nicaraguan society.⁸⁵ He argues that mixed-race Nicaraguans “appropriated all the symbols and cultural manifestations of the African slaves who had mixed with them and made them pass as indigenous expressions. [We see this in the case of] the originally indigenous (although now *mestizx*) Monimbó community in Masaya where the

⁸⁴ Foucault, Michel, *The History of Sexuality*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 82.

⁸⁵ Ramírez, *Tambor Olvidado*, 10.

African *marimba* became absorbed as a badge of the autochthonous culture.”⁸⁶ During my time in Masaya, I was able to speak with Jorge, a Monimbó musician and *marimba* maker, and even hear him play a few bright, resonant songs.

The *marimba* is a percussion instrument that resembles a xylophone. I found Ramírez’s claims surrounding erasure of Black cultural influence very true in my observations. Although the parallels to African instruments such as the balafon and in terms of musical technique seemed clear to me, I had to extensively press the question in interviews with several musicians to hear them acknowledge its African roots although they heralded it the “indigenous piano.”⁸⁷ Scholar Robert Garfias wrote a well-researched article proving the origins in “The *Marimba* of Mexico and Central America:” “the strongest evidence of the African origin of this instrument rests on three factual elements: first, the name *marimba* is itself a word of Bantu origin; second, the rattan or thin strip of wood that goes around one side of the instrument is used commonly throughout Africa; and third, the use of the vibrating membrane attached to the wall of the resonator under each key is also widespread in Africa.”⁸⁸

When Africans were kidnapped and forcibly transported to Nicaraguan’s Caribbean Coast in the slave trade, they brought with them cultural knowledge that would become integral to many elements of the country’s *Mestizx* culture. One such contribution was the *marimba*, which traveled to the Pacific Coast with the extension of slavery.⁸⁹ Various forms of the instrument exist with differing physical forms and musical styles that have developed in its spread. Other types of *marimbas* are played standing up and use dried “elongated calabash gourds” typically seen in Guatemala or “the round jicara gourd more typically found

⁸⁶ Ibid, 52.

⁸⁷ Sandoval, Jimena. Musician. Interview re: Indigenous-Mestizo relations. 3 May 2016. Home of a friend. Managua

⁸⁸ Garfias, Robert. "The Marimba of Mexico and Central America." *Latin American Music Review / Revista De Música Latinoamericana* 4, no. 2 (1983): 203-28. doi:10.2307/780267: 204.

⁸⁹ Vasquez Rojas, Miguel. Festival organizer. Interview re: Festivals of Masaya/mestizaje in religion. 1 May 2016. Home. Masaya.

on African *marimbas*” to produce sound.⁹⁰ Masaya’s *marimba de arco* is named after a curved wooden addition that allows *marimeberos* to sit down as they play and utilizes harmonic wooden boxes for resonance.

This *mestizx trend* of both retention and adaptation proves true in terms of musical technique as well. When Jorge deftly performed a number of songs for me, I instantly related the bright and buzzy tone, held trilled chords, and strong rhythms to aural memories of my family’s Putumayo World Music CDs from Africa and the Caribbean.⁹¹ When I mentioned this to my advisor Jimena, who is a professional *marimba* player, she adamantly agreed and added that the *Mestizx* musical style of *la cumbia*, which is strongly tied to and often performed on the *marimba*, is also fruit of the African diaspora.⁹² But Masaya has developed a musical style of its own heard in folklore songs, a rich style of common traits that both link songs of the genre together and distinguish them from other types. Among these traits are six-eight waltz style time signatures, intricate chords and rhythms, shifts between major and minor keys within the same song, and distinct melodic patterns.⁹³

For both Jorge and Jimena, playing the *marimba* is a way to connect to their identities. Jimena, who started playing when she was eight, told me that her relationship with the instrument is a connection to her roots.⁹⁴ According to Jorge, growing as a musician also made him grow more in-tune with his identity. As the son of a *marimba* player, Jorge picked up the skill at a young age just from watching his dad play and by experimenting with the instrument on his own. He became a skillful musician without any formal training: perhaps it

⁹⁰ "Marimba Con Tecomates." Rhythm Discovery Center. Accessed May 3, 2016. <http://rhythmdiscoverycenter.org/onlinecollection/marimba-con-tecomates/>.

⁹¹ To see an photo from my visit with Jorge, refer to Appendix C.

⁹² Sandoval, Jimena. Musician. Interview re: Indigenous-Mestizo relations. 3 May 2016. Home of a friend. Managua.

⁹³ Villa Perez, Jorge. Marimba maker/musician. Interview re: Mestizaje in music/artisanship. 8 April 2016. Home. Monimbó.

⁹⁴ Sandoval, Jimena. Musician. Interview re: Indigenous-Mestizo relations. 3 May 2016. Home of a friend. Managua.

was a natural knack or even an inherited instinct that gave him his talent. The ease and confidence he adopts when playing is clear, and this sense of belonging stems from Jorge fortifying his ties to the instrument that has been a part of his family for years. To him, being a musician is looking for, discovering, and conserving “what is ours.”⁹⁵ It is a progression that requires dedication and effort but provides him with fulfillment. Today, not many Masayans are learning how to play *marimba*, choosing to pursue other hobbies instead. With the Internet becoming increasingly available, there are many more ways for people to spend their free time, using modern technology to connect with the rest of the world rather than learning old traditions to connect with their own town. Jorge noted that even those who still play *marimba* often integrate current global styles, mostly heard in other Latin American music, into folklore songs.⁹⁶ They take popular music and fit it into the frame of folkloric time signatures and melodic garnishes, practicing modern *mestizaje* to produce a fusion.⁹⁷

Artisanship

Not only does Jorge play the *marimba*, but he also makes them by hand. The process, which he begins by finding and collecting specific types of wood with which to build the instrument, takes around a month. Next he expertly carves and shapes the separate elements, from the curved, extended arch to individual resonance blocks. Finally, he fine-tunes and finishes the wooden product with discerning attention to detail. Jorge feels like he “leaves a signature” on each of his creations and prefers to play these *marimbas* that his hands already know so well.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ Villa Perez, Jorge. Marimba maker/musician. Interview re: Mestizaje in music/artisanship. 8 April 2016. Home. Monimbó.

⁹⁶ To see a photo of a town statue of a folkloric band with traditional instruments including the *marimba*, refer to Appendix D.

⁹⁷ Villa Perez, Jorge. Marimba maker/musician. Interview re: Mestizaje in music/artisanship. 8 April 2016. Home. Monimbó.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

As a specialized craftsman, he can support himself when his instruments need musical maintenance and in terms of finances, he is able to at least partially earn a livelihood from his literacy in his own culture. This sense of independence stems from the empowerment one feels through the act of making, a skill passed down for generations in his family. Over the month-long process, Jorge feels more personally connected to indigenous and African ancestors who enacted the same traditional steps in decades past as he embodies the physical knowledge that they passed down.

Many houses in the indigenous neighborhood of Monimbó host artisan *talleres*, or workshops in which groups of people specialize in the handiwork of a particular item or material. I was able to conduct two participant observations in a leatherworking and hat making workshop, respectively, and noticed many interesting trends. It seems that most of these workshops are family-based: many of the artisans working are related to each other and live in the house hosting the *taller*. Due to this, the atmosphere was more relaxed and communal than other workplaces, and everyone seemed highly productive despite what might be seen as off-task or distracting in other environments. I think that the repetitive, physical nature of these assembly-line tasks allowed for the craft workers to stay chatty as well; the process is efficient, and muscle memory lets the brain drift to other things while still executing the same duty. Thus, artisan folklore practices and community relationships are reinforced simultaneously, strengthening the culture twofold. As I explained earlier, many traditional remnants of indigenous cultures that remain today are intangible since most of their items were razed. Yet these *talleres* generate new physical pieces in the modern era since the embodied knowledge of these acts of creation could be transmitted from person to person and mind to mind without the Spanish able to access them.

And while this empowering fact certainly aided in the preservation of these practices, practicality did as well: most artisan products are utilitarian (shoes, bags, hammocks, and

chairs are popular *taller* items), and they can be easily produced at high volumes by following repeated instructions.⁹⁹ Masaya's Artisan Market attracts many tourists who come to visit "the birthplace of Nicaraguan folklore." This profit opportunity drives a lot of *talleres*. It is quite possible that more traditional artisan items have been adapted to be more appealing to tourists' tastes, which means adhering to other country's aesthetic preferences. While this example of a modern *mestizaje* process can be concerning, these adjustments keep artisan products lucrative, which allows more *talleres* to keep practicing artisanship. In this sense, cultural alteration can be a means of cultural preservation.¹⁰⁰

Dance & Costumes

In the majority of my interviews, participants named dance as the main folkloric art and the custom that most expresses the process of *mestizaje*.¹⁰¹ Leticia, who runs a local dance center, says that all folklore dances are *Mestizx*.¹⁰² When I asked about specific African and Spanish influences, she responded that, "they are in each dance and each movement." This wise answer reminded me that *Mestizx* culture cannot be dissected and broken into percentages. It also has a subtle and distinct essence which cannot be easily articulated, taught, or credited to outside groups. She did continue to say, however, that in the dances that accompany the *marimba*, the footwork has a strong resemblance to that of Spanish *flamenco* yet integrates the indigenous style of keeping one's feet pretty much stuck to the floor.¹⁰³

Leticia, who comes from a family of seamstresses, also shared her knowledge of the

⁹⁹ To see traditional artisan goods displayed in the Museum of Folklore, refer to Appendix E.

¹⁰⁰ Participant Observation. Leatherworking workshop. Monimbó, Nicaragua. 12 April 2016.

Participant Observation. Hat making workshop. Monimbó, Nicaragua. 12 April 2016.

¹⁰¹ For a fascinating analysis of the repertoire of dance being subjected to colonial control through choreography as a means of archive, I highly encourage you to read "Choreography as Apparatus of Capture" by Andre Lepecki.

¹⁰² Paul Scolieri's *Dancing the New World: Aztecs, Spaniards, and the Choreography of Conquest* is a very helpful book on these topics.

¹⁰³ Lopez Salazar, Leticia. Dance teacher/vendor at Artisan Market. Interview re: Dances of Masaya/traditional clothing. 12 April 2016. Artisan Market. Masaya.

folkloric costumes in which the dances are performed. *Marimba* dancers wear outfits in the fashion of *fantasia*, which is an exterior style from Mexico now integrated into the cultural recitals of Masaya. Personally, Leticia feels that this example of globalized, modern *mestizaje* represents the attitude that what can be found outside of Nicaragua is better than what they have there. She does not appreciate this viewpoint of her country as inferior, but otherwise does not have a problem with the blend. Some traditional indigenous costumes illustrate the four cardinal directions through the placement of lush hibiscus flowers on the sleeves and neck area. Folkloric skirts are adorned with horizontal stripes of bold earth tones which represent the planet's layers. Atop one's head may rest a European-style feathered hat, which is undoubtedly a manifestation of the *mestizx* processes in clothing worn on one's own body to represent identity.

Other traditional dances with traditional garb include the *Baile de las inditas* (Dance of the Indians) and *Baile de las negras* (Dance of the Blacks), whose place in the legacy of *Mestizaje* seems obvious. In *Baile de las inditas*, an indigenous male dancer dons a pale mask and European clothes to represent a Spaniard while an indigenous woman wears traditional clothes. This partner dance is said to be romantic and loving, but as Antonio expressed, “the Spanish was the oppressor and so he could never really be in love with the Indian woman.”¹⁰⁴ This romanticized dance records a collective memory on the origins of *Mestizx* culture as a lovely courtship that is largely historically inaccurate.¹⁰⁵ Who can be sure why this portrayal started? Regardless of the reason, this folklore practice and its implications are still an important expression of *Mestizx* culture.

Similarly, the *Baile de las negras* has a disputed history reflected in my interviewees' responses. As *marimba* music plays, two men dance as partners with their faces painted

¹⁰⁴ Romero Rodriguez, Antonio. Businessman/musician. Interview re: Güegüensese/African influence in Masaya. 1 May 2016. Home. Masaya.

¹⁰⁵ See Doris Sommer, *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America*.

black. One of the two is dressed as and taught to dance in the style of a woman in a tradition of crossdressing seen in other aspects of *Mestizx* culture.¹⁰⁶ When I asked one interviewee why the dancers' faces are painted black, he answered that it was an indigenous tradition used to avoid being recognized before they started using masks. In modern manifestations, performers may use paint or a mask of any color to cover their faces.¹⁰⁷ However, I heard from another source that the style started from imitations of Africans from the Caribbean Coast when they danced to marimba.¹⁰⁸ If Miguel was right, why did the dancers believe they needed disguises? If Antonio was right, were they ridiculing or celebrating this cultural difference? Was it yet another instance of antiblack racism? Once again, the roots of this tradition are murky and debated, but its role today is shaped by its audience's interpretations. Regardless of these opinions' veracity, they still hold the same impact as long as they are believed to be true.

In the *Baile de las negras* and several other dances, a pair of men partner together on the dancefloor. While in some ways, this act enforces gender and sexuality norms between a heterosexual man and women, it simultaneously undermines them in an act of disidentification. Women were not supposed to dance publicly, so specialized *Mestizx* men would learn specific dance techniques imitating women's movements and crossdress in elaborate feminine dress. Antonio states that this is a very old indigenous practice which has nothing to do with romance or sexuality.¹⁰⁹ But for those able to participate in this act of gender fluidity, some might find a sense of liberation in the abilities to occupy and travel between multiple identities in this manner. *Mestizxs*, accustomed to negotiating the

¹⁰⁶ Further documentation and analysis can be found in *Transgender History & Geography: Crossdressing in Context, Volume 3* by G.G. Bolich.

¹⁰⁷ Vasquez Rojas, Miguel. Festival organizer. Interview re: Festivals of Masaya/mestizaje in religion. 1 May 2016. Home. Masaya.

¹⁰⁸ Romero Rodriguez, Antonio. Businessman/musician. Interview re: Güegüenses/African influence in Masaya. 1 May 2016. Home. Masaya.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

complexity of the manifold nature of racial/cultural identity, may find even more freedom through these folkloric norms of disidentifying. Yet it is imperative to recognize that *mestizos* were granted this access to gender fluidity due to the social rule dictating the exclusion of *Mestizas* from dance.¹¹⁰

The role of masks in Masaya's folklore traditions is robust, and the significance behind them is fascinating.¹¹¹ To my inquiries about their purpose, Sergio told me that they are "often used in dances and patron saint festivals" and also referred to them as a "refuge," "a sign of protest which would protect one's identity when one is criticizing or ridiculing authority."¹¹² Masks serve well as physical symbols of the spirit of *Güegüense*. They grant their wearers a double identity to go along with their expressions of double entendre, allowing them to use visual and linguistic obstructions to both protect their risqué actions with anonymity and allow them to better imitate and deride authority figures.

In the pre-Columbian days of Masaya's Chorotega zoomorphic religion, many gods possessed animal traits and could manifest in the human world as these animals. Believers sometimes celebrated their faith in ceremonial masks. But when the Spanish arrived and seized power, they prohibited these traditions as "pagan" and "demonic."¹¹³ According to Antonio, they also declared that only human masks were permitted and must represent the Spanish, forcing a pale-skinned identity on instead. Women were not supposed to dance in indigenous culture, and the erasure of religious animal masks, dark-skinned faces, and women's artistic contributions from indigenous customs added yet another grievance to the

¹¹⁰ Further reading on sexuality in Latin America can be found in *Gender in Postcolonial Latin America* by Florence E. Babb and *Sex and Sexuality in Latin America* by David Balderston and Donna Guy.

¹¹¹ To see a display of traditional *Güegüense* masks at the Museum of Folklore, refer to Appendix F.

¹¹² Vargas Guzman, Santiago. Lawyer/notary public. Interview re: Mestizaje in festivals/myths and legends. 28 April 2016. Law office. Masaya.

¹¹³ For further reading on how Spaniards reacted to indigenous religious practices, refer to Fernando Cervantes' *The Devil in New Spain*.

long list of aboriginal repression.¹¹⁴ Yet these limitations also led to the birth of several interesting *Mestizx* traditions, and the minoritarian groups often twisted or defied the Spanish regulations. Indigenous people continued to proudly don their religious animal masks, and in many cases when dancers wore a white Spanish masks, they did so to mock their oppressors, as seen in *El Güegüense* and *Los Diablitos*.¹¹⁵

Attitudes Towards Tradition & Change

According to Guillermo, who teaches at the Folklore School in Monimbó, dances in Masaya are also being subjected to a modern *mestizaje* process. Over his thirty-four years as a dancer, he has witnessed a lot of stylistic changes that individuals bring to the floor. But he says that in the past few years, he has observed in his classes a large trend of the most dramatic and highest number of modifications to the folklore technique he teaches. Folkloric, ballet, and popular dance styles are blending together and developing altered dances, a fact which he calls “very controversial.”¹¹⁶ And yet he personally accepts that, “there are things you can try to maintain and things you can't. I teach one form and see students innovate it.”

I think Guillermo’s acceptance of *mestizaje* in part comes from the fact that folklore dances are gaining popularity among younger people in Masaya today. It is a town priority, taught in every school as part of the curriculum, which increases exposure and accessibility to the tradition. And extracurricularly, there are so many dance groups that a good number of

¹¹⁴ It is interesting to note some similarities between Masaya’s use of masks in folkloric traditions and the Yoruba peoples’ custom of Gelede practiced primarily in Nigeria and Benin. Yet a major difference is that while indigenous women were not permitted to dance, the entire Gelede ceremony was about centering and revering womanhood (Drewal, Margaret Thompson, and Henry John Drewal. "Gelede Dance of the Western Yoruba." *African Arts* 8, no. 2 (1975): 36-79. doi:10.2307/3334829).

¹¹⁵ Romero Rodriguez, Antonio. Businessman/musician. Interview re: Güegüenses/African influence in Masaya. 1 May 2016. Home. Masaya.

¹¹⁶ Lacayo, Guillermo. Dance teacher. Interview re: Mestizaje in dance/cultural preservation. 19 April 2016. Folklore School of Masaya. Monimbó.

them cannot find an instructor. To fill this void, Guillermo has decided to step up and offer free night lessons. While he says that this decision has made him poorer and busier, it is clear that his passions for dance and teaching are more important to him. The more access there is to learning, the more students dance and contribute more variety. Masaya's combination of high demand and interest with accessible supply through free lessons has led to a mini-renaissance in its folkloric dance traditions. A renaissance comes with reinvigoration, but also reinvention.¹¹⁷

In our interviews, one participant told me that Masaya's recognition as "the birthplace of Nicaraguan folklore" is a misnomer.¹¹⁸ He argued that while his city has been the best at preserving folkloric traditions, they were not all created here. Instead, he sees Masaya as its guardian. The customs it has carried down for generations are the strongest still-living expressions of the culture of Nicaraguan *Mestizaje* born from conquest and colonization. And yet in its conservation, this city is also a site of transformation of traditions in the context of a more and more connected world.

On the other hand, I think perhaps calling Masaya the "home" over "guardian" may be better after all. "Guardian" implies that Masaya has protected folklore in a secure fortress away from other influences, as if anything could threaten it. It seems like it prioritizes static, permanent preservation. Meanwhile, I think that "home" demonstrates the caring and personal, not militaristic, relationship that Masaya has had with its culture. It implies a setting of growth over time yet also of consistency and familiarity. A home nurtures to sustain rather than isolating to preserve. While one may travel over the world, one always comes back home, celebrating memories and remembering one's origins.

¹¹⁷ Lacayo, Guillermo. Dance teacher. Interview re: Mestizaje in dance/cultural preservation. 19 April 2016. Folklore School of Masaya. Monimbó.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

Yet I also understand wanting to conserve one's traditions as they are. It is an urge that comes from love for one's culture, which is a deeply personal relationship. From what I saw in Masaya, generational growing pains play a large role in the tug-of-war between preservation and transformation. The era of change has been a particularly rapid one, with the catalyst of modern technology drastically changing the way in which we interact with each other.¹¹⁹ Older people may see these new life conditions and feel that the ways in which they are accustomed to interacting are threatened. But it is possible for things to change and yet in some ways, stay the same. I saw many adults acknowledge that there are degrees of transformation, and the essence of most customs usually stays the same over time. And many agreed that change is natural and approach modern *mestizaje* both by looking backwards, remembering what traditions they most cherish but also that they came from mixed cultural heritage. And after this reflection, they turn to look forwards to the future, ready to witness a little bit of freshness and innovation mix with the rich amalgamation of *mestizx* traditions.

Food

The term "comfort food" refers to the cuisine a certain group eats that, for one reason or another, brings the consumer a sense of comfort, familiarity, well-being, and contentment. In short, it is the taste of home. Sensory qualities like a crisp, flavorful crunch of cilantro or the smooth, earthy taste of a refreshing drink of cacao can powerfully evoke specific memories in our minds and bodies. Food is personal, cultural, communal, regional, and essential. As home cook Julia told me in our interview, "we define ourselves with food. In all our foods, there are characteristics that bring us together and are different from food from

¹¹⁹ To hone in on these new disembodied, virtual processes of *mestizaje*, read the chapter titled "Cyborgs y neomestizaje" in *Corpus frontera: Antología crítica de arte y cibercultura (2008-2011)* by Valeria Radrigán Brante.

other places."¹²⁰

The routine of making and partaking in a meal can enrich individual and community relationships.¹²¹ In Masaya, a special occasion called a *mayordomo* brings family and friends together for a few days of cooking and sharing. For Julia, many of her favorite memories come from these intergenerational gatherings during which her loved ones gathered in a crowded house full of smells and laughter. As she grew older, she became one of the masterful cooks responsible for the meal, combining ingredients grown in her beloved Masaya to make food that tasted like home. The act of eating is in some ways quite meaningful and holy: it is taking something to become part of one's body and sustain one's life. The meals cooked in these *mayordomos* was worthy of fulfilling these purposes, cooked with love.

Nicaraguan cuisine is made up of African, Spanish, and indigenous ingredients which combine in *mestizx* dishes. Without plantains from Africa or rice and bread brought to the Americas by the Spanish, the country's contemporary gastronomy would be completely different.¹²² In addition to the earlier *nacatamal* example, the dish *vigorón* also coalesces elements from all three of the originating cultures of *Mestizaje*. After enveloping the entrée in an African banana leaf, Nicaraguan cooks arrange the dish by sprinkling a fresh lettuce salad over crispy *chicharrones*, a pork snack brought over by Spain. The juicy, crisp lettuce and crunchy *chicharrones* rest majestically atop a hearty foundation of aboriginal yucca. Indigenous diets relied heavily on yucca as well as corn, known as *maíz*, both of which still remain integral components of many dishes.

In one of my interviews, I asked Jimena how *Mestizx* people handle cultural

¹²⁰ Santos Mendoza, Julia. Cook/seamstress. Interview re: Mestizaje in food/traditional clothing. 28 April 2016. Home. Masaya

¹²¹ For further reading, Rebecca Earle's work on the connections between conquest, colonization and food in *The Body of the Conquistador: Food, Race and the Colonial Experience in Latin America, 1492-1700* is especially helpful.

¹²² Flores, Dora Priscilla and Carolina de Silva. Food vendor and landlady. Interview re: Traditional food of Masaya. 27 April 2016. San Jeronimo Park. Masaya.

dissonance that exists due to the nature of the violent clash of ideologies that formed *Mestizaje*. Her answer was simple: most people do not question it because it is how they were raised.¹²³ The tensions between Spanish, indigenous, and African ideologies are not noticeable to someone who is used to living in a paradigm of these realities. She also jokingly pointed out that even though I go around everywhere asking which colonial influences affected which modern cultural markers, most Masayans do not walk around wondering, “does this food has Spanish or African influences, an if so, what are its implications?” This served as an important reminder that historical *Mestizaje* is no longer an emerging, unstable culture, but rather a well-established, dominant system with comfortable actors in it who no longer need to disidentify to survive. The generative *Mestizx* process of worldmaking, in fact, produced a culture from which minoritarian groups can disidentify.

I believe that gender and ethnicity had a large impact on the *Mestizaje* of food. Julia, although she could name a few exceptions, told me that she did not think there were strong Spanish influences in Masaya’s cuisine. As cited in section one, the vast majority of Europeans who came to Mesoamerica to conquer and colonize were men, and traditionally, men depend on women for food. The feminized connotation of cooking, the lack of Spanish women, and the population of aboriginal women over whom the European men wielded significant power meant that the Spanish relied almost completely indigenous women to cook. Therefore, I think that most of the preservation of their traditional meals and the *Mestizx* innovation were works of indigenous women.

Julia told me that there is a distinct difference between traditional and modern cuisines in Nicaragua. Old-style foods tend to have strong indigenous influences and are associated with a more survival-based diet. These plates usually require a lot of preparation

¹²³ Sandoval, Jimena. Musician. Interview re: Indigenous-Mestizo relations. 3 May 2016. Home of a friend. Managua.

and cooking time, and the main priority over taste or appearance is to make a filling dish out of affordable ingredients. In today's more modernized society, cheap, quick, and easy-to-make food is accessible. Julia is concerned that Nicaragua is slowly losing its traditional cuisine. Due to the world's growing international connectedness, a variety of food from other countries are now more widely available in Masaya, including pizza, Mexican, and Chinese food. Since the city is home to many middle-class families, basic sustenance is now not a concern, and people choose these newer options instead of the heavier and greasier food native to their own country. Yet Julia knows that even if it loses popularity, Nicaraguan traditional cuisine will never go away. Although people are embracing access to a wider variety of food options, that does not mean that they do not enjoy their country's aboriginal dishes any less. The craving for "comfort food" is deep and intense, a sort of hunger not fueled by the needs of physical survival, but rather the needs of cultural survival. Another reason these traditions will not significantly fade is because they are built into the calendar as festival foods that recur each year.¹²⁴

Religion & Patron Saint Festivals

The most obvious exhibition of *Mestizaje* may be seen in Nicaragua's dominant religion, and one can find the most obvious exhibition of this syncretized *Mestizx* Catholicism in Masaya's vibrant patron saint festivals. In *The Mestizo Mind*, Gruzinski refers to religion as "a receptor" for cultural hybridity which "acted like a magnet that spatially united elements of European and Amerindian provenance, originally foreign to one another, and made them converge."¹²⁵ One of the biggest aims in the Spanish invasion into aboriginal territory was to "convert" indigenous peoples from their own faith, which Europeans saw as "savage" and

¹²⁴ Santos Mendoza, Julia. Cook/seamstress. Interview re: Mestizaje in food/traditional clothing. 28 April 2016. Home. Masaya.

¹²⁵ Gruzinski, Serge. *The Mestizo Mind: The Intellectual Dynamics of Colonization and Globalization*. New York: Routledge, 2002: 106.

“demonic,” to Catholicism. Nicaragua’s aboriginal people obviously resisted this violent imposition, but the Spanish subjected them to such merciless conditions that it seemed that many people had no other choice than to give in. And yet they never really did give in: even though they went to church, indigenous peoples subversively paired their polytheistic gods and goddesses with a Catholic Saint equivalent who possessed similar traits in an act of disidentification.¹²⁶ While the Spanish thought they had successfully converted the indigenous population to European Catholicism, they were actually generating a new *Mestizx* faith with a framework of Biblical ideology but also heavily infused with the “nature-based, pagan ideals” of aboriginal religions.¹²⁷ The fact that Saints play such a key role in Catholicism made this syncretism as smooth as it could possibly be, considering that it was a coercive and brutal union. While other strains of Christianity focus on Jesus and God only, the sect’s Saints, like the indigenous peoples’ polytheistic gods, allow for religious multiplicity, offering worshipers many individual, unique, and tangible figures with whom to intimately connect. At one point or another, the Spanish realized that indigenous peoples were matching their gods with a parallel Saint- figures which acted as receptors of hybridity- and added their own connection. In another attempt to subjugate their resilient spirits, the Europeans portrayed San Miguel, a powerful vanquisher, with a slayed dragon-lizard at his feet. This image was quite jolting to religious indigenous peoples since the reptile purposefully resembled their main god Quetzalcoatl; the Spanish were depicting their faith as superior and more powerful than theirs. It is an illustration of the amalgamated roots of *Mestizx* Catholicism, showing a violent power dynamic of oppression, yet also subtly revealing indigenous power: because they felt so threatened by indigenous subversion, the Spanish officially added Quetzalcoatl to their religious iconography and acknowledged the

¹²⁶ Once again, see Louise Burkhart’s work, especially the book *Painted Words*, for more insight into post-colonial religious syncretism.

¹²⁷ Vargas Guzman, Santiago. Lawyer/notary public. Interview re: Mestizaje in festivals/myths and legends. 28 April 2016. Law office. Masaya.

influence of aboriginal beliefs.¹²⁸

Today, Masaya is the home to the most patron saint festivals in Nicaragua, which are quite representative events of *Mestizaje* that will not fade away easily due to their annual repetitions. Dance teacher Leticia is proud that her town is the site of a full calendar year of celebrations, especially those honoring San Jerónimo which extend from mid-September to late November. I was able to speak with Miguel, a festival organizer, about the customs enacted over this three-month span. In mainstream “official” European Catholicism, San Geronimo was a reclusive man who translated the Bible and is the most popular saint of Masaya. But in *Mestizx* religious beliefs, Jerónimo’s secret “twin” is the indigenous god of fire, volcanoes, and dance, known as Xochillpilli. As the Masaya Volcano looks out over the city, standing tall over centuries and gently releasing smoke as performers sing and dance through the streets, there is no question which personality of this *Mestizx* figure is tied more deeply to the town and its people. All patron saint festivals include processions in which religious icons are paraded through the town’s streets and often to homemade altars in peoples’ houses, an intimate religious act with both Spanish and indigenous roots which localizes and personalizes the honored figure to its town. Everything is adorned with blooming flowers and small trees, a distinctly indigenous practice of using natural elements to honor and worship.¹²⁹

One of the most distinctive celebrations of the San Geronimo festival is a narrative dance called the *Torovenado*. Silvio Ortega describes the tradition as “an act of humor accompanied with resistance which starts when one begins a relationship between the oppressed (the deer) and the oppressors (the bull). It is one of the most representative dances

¹²⁸ Vargas Guzman, Santiago. Lawyer/notary public. Interview re: Mestizaje in festivals/myths and legends. 28 April 2016. Law office. Masaya.

¹²⁹ Vasquez Rojas, Miguel. Festival organizer. Interview re: Festivals of Masaya/mestizaje in religion. 1 May 2016. Home. Masaya.

of our *mestizaje*.”¹³⁰ Masaya’s original name was “*Mazalyan*” in Nahuatl, which translates to “land of the deer” in English. While the agile, peaceful, clever, and feminine deer represents the aboriginal Chorotega people, the Spanish are symbolized by a bull that stands for force, rage, imposition, war, and masculinity.¹³¹ The dynamic between the threatening, aggressive bull and passive, serene deer offers a clear and gendered depiction of relationships between the Spanish and indigenous people in this period that produced a new race. And thus the *torovenado* is the product of their union, a new blended animal to represent *Mestizaje*.¹³² This dance, performed in traditional indigenous style, quite vividly acknowledges and centers the history and identity of a mixed ancestry in a performative act of worldmaking, creating a temporal space for an individual who cannot fully accept nor reject existing racial paradigms.

Today, social rules regarding who could participate freely in various customs have fallen away. One festival event, *El Torovenado*, has strong roots in crossdressing.¹³³ Santiago told me that a decent number of women participate dressed as men, although men dressing as women is still much more common. In more recent years, gay, trans, and other individuals of diverse gender and sexual identities enthusiastically contribute to the tradition of crossdressing, dressed in elegant attire and vibrant makeup. Nicaragua is a majority Catholic nation, and on a normal day, most of these people might attract varying degrees of negative attention when adopting a gender non-conforming appearance.¹³⁴ However, Santiago tells me that in his observations, their crossdressing is tolerated at worst and more often received positively on these days.¹³⁵ For one day during the festival of San Geronimo, these people are

¹³⁰ Ortega, Silvio. *El Torovenado*. 2014. Speech written for the Conference of Masaya Folklore.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ To see a display of traditional *Torovenado* attire, refer to Appendix G.

¹³⁴ Vargas Guzman, Santiago. Lawyer/notary public. Interview re: *Mestizaje* in festivals/myths and legends. 28 April 2016. Law office. Masaya.

¹³⁵ However, he cannot accurately speak for these communities experiences if he does not identify as a gender

able to dress how they want confidently due to the nature of the designated disidentifications traditionally enacted during *El Torovenado*. These community customs of gender subversion combine during this time to temporarily construct a world that accommodates for expression of sexual fluidity.¹³⁶

Although this community-wide disidentification is empowering, it is not an everyday act, and Masaya's dominant paradigm usually does not accommodate for people who neither identify nor counteridentify in terms of gender. Maybe the town will experience a folklore-based *mestizaje* movement for creating a more inclusive ideology towards gender in the future. People of a diversity of sexual and gender identities are also adding to the *mestizaje* of Masaya's customs, bringing their own skills and talents as well as embracing the multiplicity, fluidity, and ambiguity that an amalgamated culture allows for.

or sexual minority.

¹³⁶ Mikhail Bakhtin's work on the carnivalesque is pertinent to this discussion.

Conclusion

In present-day Masaya, a town demographically marked by centuries-old history, transformative *mestizx* processes occur simultaneously.¹³⁷ While the *Mestizx* identity was born of a fusion of other cultures, many are concerned that their town is losing its traditions, ironically enough, through modern forms of *mestizaje*. But the patterns of *Mestizaje* carried on for long enough that a new *Mestizx* culture formed, which grew so prolific and long-lived that it became the region's dominant "racial" and cultural presence. It is no longer new and is firmly established as its own distinct identity. In this position, as a culture whose current prescribers number in the millions, whose existence spans centuries, and whose goal is preservation, *Mestizx* culture has been, is currently, and will always be subject to change. No long-lived culture can exist in isolation, "purity," and permanence as it interacts horizontally with other groups and is vertically carried down through the eras by different generations. Yet due to the flexibility nature of its cultural repertoire, Masaya's folklore culture is particularly resilient no matter the context, transforming in relatively small degrees and retaining the essence of the practice.

To employ Muñoz's concepts, it is by "recycling" these "encoded meanings" that *Mestizx* ancestors were able to make a world to better account for the complex, shifting reality of their lives. These repeatable, everyday acts are accessible to subsequent generations who also enact these practices. By dematerializing aspects of their culture by granting descendants with inherited corporeal knowledge, instructive and repetitive processes, and a rich mental map to which the Spanish had no access, indigenous and African people built a synthesized folklore. The process of forming this heritage, created in a *mestizx* manner of rejecting components and selectively assuming some to mix with others, is a means of

¹³⁷ To see a multipanel Mural illustrating Masaya's traditional folkloric customs, refer to Appendix H.

creating cultures in which minoritarian individuals such as *mestizxs* can exist in an accommodating environment that accounts for their needs and existence outside of typical societal categories. Throughout this thesis, I have investigated how growing populations of mixed-race peoples in colonial Latin America destabilized, subverted, and overthrew categorical hierarchies. They proved that it is the human-constructed systems that are flawed and unnatural, not that which escapes their governance in acts of becoming. Examining the history of *mestizaje* reveals that it is a generative process of change which activates a specific state of being in individual identities as well as modifies or forms a culture in the face of restrictive existing paradigms. Acts of becoming gradually generated, altered, preserved, and became special *mestizx* traditions. The traditions mixed Spanish, aboriginal, and African customs and formed a living culture which uses change as a form of both preservation and innovation. It is my hope that my thesis has provided insight into the notions of tradition, change, mixing, existing paradigms, and *mestizaje* which all of us keep exploring.

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Appendix

Appendix A



Masaya Text Mural, Masaya, Nicaragua. Personal photograph by author. April 28, 2016.

Appendix B



Masaya Landscape Mural, Masaya, Nicaragua. Personal photograph by author. April 28, 2016.

Appendix C



Ocarina Silva Valle, Maria Jose. *Masaya Marimba Visit*. April 14, 2016. Masaya, Nicaragua.

Appendix D



Statue of Musicians in Masaya, Masaya, Nicaragua. Personal photograph by author. April 28, 2016.

Appendix E



Artisan Goods from Folklore Museum Exhibition, Masaya, Nicaragua. Personal photograph by author. April 28, 2016.

Appendix F



Güegüense Masks from Folklore Museum Exhibition, Masaya, Nicaragua. Personal photograph by author. April 28, 2016.

Appendix G



Torovenado Costumes from Folklore Museum Exhibition, Masaya, Nicaragua. Personal photograph by author. April 28, 2016.

Appendix H



Masaya Multipanel Mural, Masaya, Nicaragua. Personal photograph by author. April 28, 2016.