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Indigenous MediaSpace and the Production of (Trans)locality on Nicaragua’s Mosquito Coast

Kevin Glynn¹ and Julie Cupples¹

Abstract
This article draws on notions of networked and multiscalar globalities to explore recent developments around indigenous and Afro-Caribbean media in Nicaragua’s Atlantic Coast region, whose inhabitants are reasserting their collective autonomy by reinvigorating and reformulating a centuries-old ideal of cosmopolitanism forged through a long history of intercultural exchange and the indigenization of foreign elements. The authors argue that their activities are advancing the development of convergent cultures associated with counterinscriptions of a grassroots globalization and the expansion of contexts in which new forms of indigenous and Afro-Caribbean cultural citizenship can emerge and become effective. Hence, mediated practices of cultural persistence on Nicaragua’s Mosquito Coast intensify and broaden the revivification and circulation of relational, nonmodern ontologies whose epistemic force contributes to wider Latin American movements for social transformation and illustrates in new ways the importance and the potential of indigenous media operations and the intercultural global networks within which they are implicated.

Keywords
convergence, cultural citizenship, globalization, indigenous media, Nicaragua

The problems of the local are core to the concerns of indigenous media producers across the globe. As Bennett and Blundell (1995, 2) note, despite the wide diversities of identity, experience, and situation that prevail among the First Peoples who compose

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what is sometimes called the Fourth World, these peoples share as well certain key commonalities of political purpose, among which are included the centrality of “a territorial groundedness” that means “questions of culture and identity are always inextricably caught up with . . . questions of land” and are thus closely tied to distinctive modes of a politics of place. As the anthropologist Eric Michaels (1994, 93) wrote of videos made by the Aboriginal Warlpiri people of Yuendumu in the remote Australian outback,

What are to the European observer semantically empty landscape pans are explained by Aboriginal producers and viewers as full of meaning. The camera in fact traces “tracks” or locations where ancestors, spirits, or historical characters traveled. The apparently empty shot is quite full of life and history to the Aboriginal eye. The electronic inscription process may be said to be operating for the Warlpiri in a way not unlike their [traditional] graphic system, providing mnemonic, evocative symbols amenable to interpretation and historical accuracy when viewed in the proper social and cultural context.

Michaels’s influential analysis here helps to reveal how and why, over the course of the past three or four decades, both Western scholarly appraisals and prevailing opinions among indigenous populations have tended to shift away from views of the global spread of contemporary media technologies as agents of a new phase of uncomplicated electronic Euro-American colonialism toward a growing appreciation of the capacities of film, video, and digital communication apparatuses for a variety of types of social, cultural, and political mobilization—however fraught with risks—by formerly colonized and native peoples. As Molnar and Meadows (2001, 200) have characterized this shift, “The initial fears of uncontrolled television broadcasts, particularly to remote indigenous communities, have given way to a more measured perception of the empowering possibilities of new communication technologies as a cultural resource.”

A parallel shift has taken place within Latin American communication studies. In the 1970s and 1980s, before the pioneering work of scholars such as Jesús Martín Barbero (see, e.g., 1998) and Néstor García Canclini (see, e.g., 1982, 1990) drew attention to the creative ways in which subordinated people use media to express political agency and cultural contestation, Latin American communication studies was closely aligned with dependency theory and tended to view mass media merely as instruments of imperialism and manipulation.

We begin this article by exploring this shift and its value for understanding the cultural production of indigenous media space. We then focus on a community television channel, BilwiVision, which operates on Nicaragua’s Mosquito Coast, a multiethnic area where most of the country’s indigenous people live; the Mosquitia is quite distinct from Pacific Nicaragua, a comparatively homogeneous, culturally Hispanic region. In our analysis, we place special emphasis on the question of the local and its relationships to television production. The concept of the local gains many of its most salient meanings in the contemporary world through its relations of contrast (and of
similarity) not only with the national and the regional but, increasingly, with the global. However, although the concept of the local is often activated in terms of its difference from the global, it is important to recognize that the latter is constituted and becomes effective within local material and discursive spaces. It is therefore crucial to avoid a reified conception of nested scales (wherein the global is seen naturally to “contain” the national, which in turn naturally “contains” the regional, etc.) to grasp the ways in which the global exists within locales rather than merely containing them (Smith 1992; Jauhiainen 2006), for the production of the global and the production of the local are complexly intertwined, ongoing, and mutually constitutive projects. Hardt and Negri (2000, 44–45, emphasis original) also reject what they call “the false dichotomy between the global and the local” and urge us to address “the production of locality, that is, the social machines that create and re-create the identities and differences that are understood as the local.” For Hardt and Negri, this is a very different political project from the primordializing and romanticizing view that asserts that the local must be defended from the intrusion of the global. We believe it constitutes a more productive lens through which to explore the political and cultural potential of indigenous media production. As well, alternative conceptualizations such as that of a networked (as opposed to nested) scalar spatiality raise crucial questions about “whether and how actors embedded at different territorial scales are able to mobilize support and resources through spatially extensive networks of engagement” (Barnett 2004, 70). Such an approach allows us to grasp the complex political spaces opened up through the practices of indigenous media production, where space is to be understood not as a gap or distance to be bridged but rather as a site of discursive activity (Barnett 2004; Harvey 1982).

Thinking about localities and the production of the local in terms of networked scales means thinking simultaneously about globalities. In his argument against a panoptic understanding of globalization, Steven Flusty (2004, 8) notes that “locales are as much sites for the inception and transmission of globally extended relations as for their reception.” For Flusty, globalization is constituted through specific practices that are embedded in and dependent on the local. Flusty’s (2004, 59) approach focuses our attention on the ways in which globalization is both appropriated and produced by “proliferating everyday tactics” that collapse the global–local dichotomy. Similarly, Arjun Appadurai (2000) writes of a “grassroots globalization,” and Henry Jenkins (2006b, 155) alerts us to the expanding forms of bottom-up convergence that involve new ways of participating in media production, circulation, and reception and are “giving rise to a new pop cosmopolitanism.” A notion of such processes is important for our purposes in this article, for as we shall see, the Mosquito Coast has long been a notable site of multiple convergences that have fundamentally shaped the region’s histories, identities, and inhabitants. Today, the production of media on the Mosquito Coast involves interesting forms of “grassroots convergence” (Jenkins 2006b, 155) that implode the conceptual polarities of a problematic global–local binary.

The networked, multiscalar, and convergent relations of contemporary global cultural and geographical significance play out in particularly fascinating ways within
contexts of Fourth World, postcolonial political struggle. In regard to national forma-
tions, indigeneity “both precede[s] and stubbornly refuse[s] engulfment in a singular
nationalized imaginary” (Bennett and Blundell 1995, 2). Meanwhile, some of the most
intense and “complex connectivities” (Tomlinson 1999) associated with cultural glo-
balization involve those that have been forged between diverse and dispersed indige-
nous peoples around the complex plays of their commonalities and differences of
political cause and identity. Contemporary indigeneity is thus constituted at once by
both intense forms of a politicized, place-based localism and an ever densifying set of
globally mediated networks. We therefore treat the case of BilwiVision in terms of the
production of media spaces that cross various types of boundaries while remaining
anchored in an increasingly mediatized set of localities and identities. This approach
enables us to think about the televisual production of (trans)locality without romanti-
cization and without reifying the global into something that is seen to be essentially
extraneous, overarching, and inherently destructive or intrusive.

The distinctiveness and contingency of articulations that continuously produce and
reproduce globality are suggested by the particular convergence of local and global
modes of mobility through space and across scales depicted in Figure 1, which was
taken outside the Bilwi production studios where a multiethnic group of young Costeño
mediamakers produce programming for TV channel 7. The picture shows the bicycles used by cable channel 7 crews to move through their local communities producing video footage, parked beneath the multiple satellite dishes that constitute a mode of global conveyance whereby a sense of place can be projected into global mediaspace. The resulting assemblage of humans and nonhumans actualizes the mutual production of specific instantiations of the global and the local, whereby social and cultural relations are extended outward from the Mosquito Coast to generate a form of translocality.

Thus, we argue that Costeños, the people of Nicaragua’s Mosquito Coast, are making use of media to reassert a sense of cultural and political autonomy by reinvigorating the region’s centuries-old “cosmopolitan ideal” (Pineda 2006, 12) of global interconnectedness, which has historically been linked to trading relationships and the availability of economic opportunities within the area. Costeños feel that this cosmopolitan ideal came under particularly intensive threat first in the wake of the coast’s 1894 annexation by the Nicaraguan nation and then again at the time of the Sandinista Revolution (see Pineda 2006). BilwiVision’s stated objective of promoting interculturalism—of intercultural convergence—is supported by Costeños in part for its current stimulation of new dialogues both within and beyond the Mosquito Coast, whereby an unwelcome sense of isolation from the wider world is increasingly overcome and new modes of locality and translocal identities are being actively forged. As one young student about to begin her university studies said to us,

We have to remember that we as Miskitos, as indigenous people, we have preserved our culture, but it is a culture that is always changing, that is always evolving. And that is something that people in other places need to take into account. . . . Indigenous communities need to be able to use television to keep our culture active and to preserve it, because through television other countries might come to invest in our culture. They might say . . . let us go and support them so they can continue to evolve as a people. . . . In the past the people from the Pacific used to say the Miskitos live in the trees . . . but now some of them have come to our coast and they have realized that we have a culture that is of global interest.

Indigenous Media (Counter)production

The nexus between visual media production and Western colonial expansion is old and intimate. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, ethnologists and anthropologists equipped first with still and later movie cameras fueled colonialist fantasies by making “primitivist” (Prins 2002) photographs and films of indigenous peoples whose supposed ongoing collective extinction these image makers took themselves to be documenting. At about the same time, commercial filmmakers also began to exploit the colonizing and primitivist fantasies of their more popular audiences; just a few years after the 1890 Wounded Knee massacre, the Edison film company recorded for Kinetoscope exhibition a Sioux ceremony of extreme spiritual significance,
inaugurating a process of cultural decontextualization and trivialization so egregious that some have characterized it as a form of culturecide (Prins 1989, 80). The subsequent emergence, entrenchment, and growth of broadcast media in places such as remote Australia and the Arctic Circle played an important role in the territorial expansion of nonindigenous authority, control, and institutions and in the subjection of First Peoples to processes of “cultural dislocation” (Roth and Valaskakis 1989, 224) and “cultural replacement” (Valaskakis 1992, 67).

But if the mobilization of visual media and radio toward colonizing ends has deep historical roots, so too does the indigenous recognition of the potency of images (Leuthold 1998, 70; Silko 1990). It is arguable that this recognition, in conjunction with indigenous cultural proclivities and competencies developed across “centuries of pre-European trade and intertribal communication” toward the appropriation and adaptation of foreign techne to native purposes (Leuthold 1998, 74), laid the foundations for the eventual emergence of what we might see as a tradition of indigenous countermedia production that has taken shape in places as far-flung as Arctic Canada, the Amazon rain forests of Brazil, the Australian outback, and the South Pacific (see, e.g., Ginsburg 2002; Molnar and Meadows 2001; Parks 2005; Roth 2005; Roth and Valaskakis 1989; Turner 1991a, 1991b). Leslie Marmon Silko (1990, 73) notes with regard to the North American context in the colonial era that “Europeans were shocked at the speed and ease with which Native Americans synthesized, then incorporated, what was alien and new” (quoted in Leuthold 1998, 74). Such processes of cultural borrowing and adaptation simultaneously extend, preserve, and modify (rather than destroy) indigenous cultures, albeit within relations of inequality (García Canclini 1982). By the dawn of the new millennium, it was clear to some observers that a diverse collection of indigenous media producers around the world had established a collective “effort to turn the tables on the historical trajectory of the power relations embedded in research monographs, photography, and ethnographic practice” and to “reverse and resignify the history of colonial looking relations in which film and photography became the visible evidence of an indigenous world that was expected to disappear but instead persists” (Ginsburg 2002, 44, 50).

The appropriation and indigenization of Western systems of visual representation within First People’s media making has thus entailed the production and regeneration of cultural identities, the promotion of social and political activism for self-determination and autonomy, the advancement of new cultural survival strategies and modes of self-representation, the development of local and global networks of relations that extend both within and beyond the Fourth World, the mobilization of image apparatuses for the articulation, renewal, and circulation of indigenous counterhistories, and the introduction of new mechanisms for the preservation and revitalization of endangered native memories and practices (see, e.g., Aufderheide 1995; Gallois and Carelli 1995; Ginsburg 1991, 1995, 2002, 2003; Himpele 2004, 2008; Prins 1989, 2002; Shohat and Stam 1994; Turner 1991b, 1992, 1995, 2002; Valaskakis 2005; Weatherford 1990). The contemporary growth of indigenous media production collectives and activities emerged significantly in the wake of the new social movements and decolonization struggles of the 1960s and has substantially expanded with the proliferation of small,

For example, the Kayapo Indians of Brazil are one of about ten Amazon basin tribes that engage very actively in media production, beginning with still photography and sound recording in the 1970s and film and video in the 1980s (Turner 1991a, 305). The anthropologist Terence Turner (1991a, 1991b, 1992, 1995, 2002), who has worked closely with Kayapo mediamakers for many years, has copiously documented their adept and effective appropriations of Western media technologies to serve their own cultural and political purposes, such as the preservation and revival of traditional tribal practices, the creation of connections and networks involving indigenous groups previously unknown to the Kayapo and scattered both within and far beyond the Amazon rain forest, the expression of opposition toward Brazilian government activities seen by the Kayapo as threatening to their lands and interests, and the generation of international support for such resistance politics. Turner (2002, 85–86) argues that the Kayapo’s generally successful media undertakings can be fully understood only with reference to the tribe’s “powerful . . . cultural traditions of representation and mimetic objectification,” which the Kayapo have not only maintained but have indeed “extended and strengthened” through their media production activities. The Kayapo have thus effectively incorporated Western visual media within their existing social structures (rather than seeing the structures swamped by the media) and made use of those media for purposes of cultural assertion and self-defense. For instance, Kayapo leaders have cannily and self-consciously appropriated Western stereotypes of the “jungle savage,” which they have projected back to Westerners through the media images they craft of themselves for white consumption and thus exploit the naïveté of their nonindigenous audiences to defend their native lands (Aufderheide 1995, 91; Gallois and Carelli 1995). They have as well produced carefully and spectacularly constructed media events for global consumption around protest activities against the imposition of International Monetary Fund policies and destructive Brazilian government hydroelectric projects (Turner 2002). Furthermore, a core dimension of their production practice involves the global dissemination of media images of their own media image-making activities. These images are important to Kayapo leaders and community members as visual evidence for the outside world of the tribe’s facilities as media producers. Many of these global media images depict Kayapo videomakers adorned in traditional tribal accoutrements with professional quality cameras slung over their shoulders, thus demonstrating in a most concrete way that it is not only Westerners who are capable of mastering and mobilizing these technologies (Turner 1991a). Finally, Kayapo leaders and mediamakers carefully craft the types of images they wish to project not only to nonindigenous but also to other indigenous peoples, as well as those intended for their own internal consumption. Turner (2002, 87) describes the latter process as a kind of “spontaneous reflexive mimesis” that draws on, reworks, and renews immemorial Kayapo mimetic traditions for the video age. The Kayapo have thus produced performative video enactments of “all the aspects of
village life they considered essential to a good community, from ceremonies to home-building to soccer games.” By thereby “creating a representation of themselves as a fully established, normal community, they were helping to create the social reality they were representing,” effectively “acting themselves, for themselves.”

The notion that indigenous media production practices entail not just the creation of texts but also the renewal and reworking of distinctive forms of social relations is a key point in the Western scholarly literatures around this topic, if one that is still not widely enough emphasized. Michaels (1994, 28–29) notes that in the early 1980s, the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association (CAAMA) created a radio broadcasting operation that was “unarguably Aboriginal,” though its distinctive Aboriginality had less to do with the outfit’s on-air content, “which more often than not was American country music and imported reggae,” than with “the organization of the workplace and the relations of production,” which generated an announcing style and a locally driven, community-oriented ethos (including phone-in shout-outs), which combined to give “the station its authority and resonance for its Aboriginal audience.” In Canada, indigenous broadcasters have collectively generated new “frontier audiovisual spaces” that have become vital sites for the expression of “First Peoples’ cultural, social, and political imaginaries” and crucibles for the production of native “media citizens in control of their own information services and public intellectual perspectives” (Roth 2005, 219).

Zacharias “Sak” Kunuk is a Canadian Inuit carver and video producer who founded his country’s first indigenous media production company, Igloolik Isuma Productions, and has written, produced, directed, and edited videos in the Inuktitut language. Kunuk’s productions reenact and record traditional Inuit lifeways as they existed prior to the Canadian government’s creation of fixed indigenous settlements in the mid-twentieth century. Kunuk’s videowork, like CAAMA’s radio broadcasts, involves community participation, though Kunuk’s main interest lies in the creation of what he describes as the first recorded histories to be produced from his people’s viewpoints. Kunuk’s work, like that of the Kayapo, thus involves cultural assertion and preservation as well as the creation of links with other indigenous and nonindigenous groups located within and beyond the vast Canadian Arctic. In Kunuk’s videos, community members wear traditional Inuit clothes and perform traditional Inuit practices. Kunuk thus hopes to produce both intercultural and intracultural, transgenerational understanding. He says that before the arrival of the missionaries who told his people “to turn away from our old way of life so that we can be saved” and before the government’s creation of settlement programs, the Inuit lived seminomadically on the land for thousands of years. Since then, things have “turned/changed overnight,” but even today, “we survive by knowing the Inuit culture” (Hendrick and Fleming 1991, 26, 28). Kunuk’s media production activity might be understood as a form of “innovative traditionalism” (Daley and James 2004, 11; also see Ginsburg 2008) that both exemplifies and promotes indigenous resistance as “cultural persistence,” whereby “the social memory and lived experience of traditionalism” are “continually negotiated in the discourse and practice of everyday life” (Valaskakis 1993, 293).

Kunuk expresses an air of ambivalence toward many of the changes his people have undergone and the impacts of the new technologies that have so profoundly
transformed his Arctic home of Igloolik, noting in particular his fascination with TV, movies, and Ski-Doo snowmobiles. “Of course, we have to adapt to the world. I have no argument with that. My argument is that there is another way of living, and that other way is Inuit. . . . I am struggling between two ways. That’s why it’s important for me to record history” (Hendrick and Fleming 1991, 26). Kunuk’s media production activities can thus be seen as part of a struggle toward his people’s cultural self-re-creation, a struggle to produce meaningful bridges not only with other peoples and generations but also with other times and other possible new self-identifications and identities. His media practice therefore involves an exploration of cultural “in-betweenness” (Bhabha 1996), of the border zones between old and new, past and present, being and becoming—border zones that indigenous peoples experience in distinctive ways because of the distinctiveness of their historical experiences of colonization (McMaster 1995). Ginsburg (2003, 311) characterizes many indigenous media producers as “border crossers” because of their need to move routinely between different cultural worlds to “speak effectively to (at least) two kinds of” communities: native and settler. We might thus understand Kunuk (and many other indigenous mediamakers) as practitioners involved in the production of border passages and hybrid spaces that cross lines of social and cultural difference (racial, generational) as they traverse geographical expanses. For example, Kunuk’s videos have been broadcast over the airwaves of Canada’s Aboriginal People’s Television Network (APTN), the world’s first nationwide indigenous cable TV network (launched in 1999). APTN inaugurated new channels of communication between the peoples of the Arctic north (see Ginsburg 2002; Roth 2005). As well, Kunuk’s videos have been featured at film festivals in cities such as Montreal, Vancouver, New York, Los Angeles, and Paris and countries including Denmark, Holland, and Japan (Hendrick and Fleming 1991, 28). Such planetary trajectories illustrate Ginsburg’s (2003, 314–16, emphasis original) point that “indigenous media productions have increasingly become part of global cultural flows.” Fourth World production, distribution, and reception networks hence constitute a broad “mediascape of social relations” within which a diverse array of communities can “reenvision their current realities and possible futures, from the revival of local cultural practices, to the insertion of their histories into national imaginaries, to the creation of new transnational arenas that link indigenous makers around the globe in a common effort to make their concerns visible to the world.” In Roth’s (2005, 11) view, indigenous mediamakers “are combining the forces of postmodernity with their own particular cultures, to synthesize their heritage with the project of undertaking their own development.”

A major problem for indigenous media producers everywhere has been the struggle to access sustainable funding adequate to the pursuit of such objectives. Indigenous media operations have grappled with the worst aspects of both commercial and publicly funded media systems, leading on one hand to difficulties associated with the need to attract majority audience interest to satisfy the bottom lines of advertising sponsors and on the other to excessive dependency on government largess in an age of neoliberal public purse string tightening (a problem that is often compounded by risks and fears of potentially offending the sensibilities of political patrons). As a consequence, small
indigenous media operations have tended to fare better, while maintaining a more effective capacity for localism and community connectedness, than have larger outfits (Molnar and Meadows 2001; Batty 1993). Some scholars have pointed however toward the recent emergence of new models for indigenous media practice that strive to blend commercially oriented and community-based approaches as a way of maintaining political independence (see, e.g., Molnar and Meadows 2001). Along such lines, we might note, for example, that Australian Aboriginal medimakers such as the Imparja TV network have devised ways of selectively exploiting the revenue-generating capacity of global blockbuster TV shows during key prime-time broadcasting hours to cross-subsidize the production and circulation of “Aboriginal language programming produced by and for Aboriginal people” (Parks 2005, 52), including “dreamtime” videos rooted in indigenous cultural practices. These production activities have helped to facilitate “territorial reclamation and cultural survival in postcolonial Australia” (Parks 2005, 48) while suggesting that the global media apparatus “need not be an agent of Western cultural imperialism but rather can be used to assert local interests and priorities” (Parks 2005, 59).

The Mosquito Coast of Nicaragua

The Caribbean part of Nicaragua, now administratively divided into two autonomous regions, the North Atlantic Autonomous Region (RAAN) and the South Atlantic Autonomous Region (RAAS), has followed a very different historical trajectory from that of the Pacific part of the country. It was never colonized by Spain but instead became a British protectorate during the colonial era. In 1894 the region was forcibly incorporated into the Nicaraguan nation, and British involvement there was brought to an official close with the signing of the Harrison–Altamirano Treaty in 1905 (Pineda 2006, 38).

As noted, while the Pacific region is populated mainly by ethnically homogeneous Spanish-speaking Mestizos, the Caribbean is a multilingual and multiethnic region that is home to most of Nicaragua’s remaining indigenous peoples (the Miskito, the Mayangna, and the Rama) and to a large English-speaking Creole population descended from African slaves. It is important to recognize that the identity boundaries that establish and differentiate among these ethnic groups are historically fluid, flexible, shifting, and highly unstable (Dennis 2004; Pineda 2006). The Miskito are the largest indigenous group in the region, having risen to dominance in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by pushing other indigenous groups such as the Mayangna inland and thus ensuring their geographical seclusion (Dennis 2004). Still, all groups that inhabit the Atlantic Coast collectively self-identify as Costeños.

Costeños have a long history of creative cultural borrowing, exchange, and indigenization of foreign forces and elements. Indeed, as Mary Helms (1969, 1971) insists, it was only as a result of contact with Europeans that the Miskito came to constitute themselves as an ethnic group; their strong cultural identity was forged as a result (rather than in spite) of contact with external elements. It appears that Costeños have
always been receptive to outsiders and foreign cultural practices and products (Helms 1971; Dennis 2004). In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Miskito interacted and intermarried with escaped African slaves and conducted extensive dealings with British pirates and traders. It was not until the nineteenth century that “the racial identification of Costeños began to bifurcate towards either end of a Black-Indian ideological spectrum” (Pineda 2006, 71).

The British presence in the region that started in the seventeenth century is widely understood by Costeños to have been one of mutual benefit and reciprocity, based on shared interests and a common enemy, the Spaniards. In the eyes of the Costeños, their alliance with the British made consumer goods (guns, iron, tools, and cloth) available and helped keep the Spaniards at bay (for discussion, see Helms 1971; Hale 1992; García 1996; Dennis 2004; Pineda 2006). The Miskito developed what Charles Hale (1992) has called an Anglo affinity, including an apparent esteem for all things English (Helms 1971). As Dennis and Olien (1984) write, the Miskito took aspects of British culture that appealed to them. These aspects include the British monarchical model (the Miskito had their own king), top hats and suits, gold-braided uniforms, scepters, and titles.2 Throughout the course of the British involvement on the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua, escaped slaves and Afro-Caribbean cultural elements were also incorporated into Costeño culture, and an “Anglo ideology” eventually became prevalent among Creole Costeños (Gordon 1998, 251). Cosmopolitanism developed over a long historical period of Costeño interaction with “foreign” peoples and has become a highly valued dimension of self-identification in Mosquito Coast cities such as Bilwi (Puerto Cabezas; Pineda 2006).

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Costeños developed close relationships with Moravian missionaries and with the owners and managers of U.S. companies that came to the region to take advantage of the extensive forest, mineral, and marine resources; hence, processes of cultural assimilation and hybridization intensified. Interaction with foreign markets contributed to widespread environmental destruction (Nietschmann 1973, 1979), but it also provided the local people with access to a wage economy that enabled them to purchase consumer goods (Dennis 2004). Helms (1971) describes early Miskito culture as a “purchase society” in which cash income and imported goods became cultural necessities. In Puerto Cabezas, a cosmopolitan consumerism developed from the early twentieth century until the Sandinista Revolution, characterized by a shared love of the imported foods, music, media (including U.S. newspapers and magazines), and other consumer products made available by the presence of jobs, immigrant entrepreneurs, and active shipping operations, combined with an awareness and resentment among Costeños of the exploitive environmental and labor practices conducted by foreign companies within the region (Pineda 2006).

In terms of Costeños’ relative openness to Moravian missionizing in their midst, Dennis (2004, 187) highlights the “ability of local peoples to search for foreign cultural features they find useful and then integrate them into their own ongoing cultural system.” Indeed, the Moravian Church, which had become the largest church on the coast by the twentieth century, disapproved of many of the Miskito’s traditional beliefs,
including their traditional healers, the sukia, who use supernatural powers for healing. As Claudia García (1996) notes, the Miskito synthesized, reformulated, and redefined these beliefs to adapt them to the new situation. Miskito traditions such as the sukia have therefore survived in spite of church opposition. By the 1980s, when Costeños began an intense conflict with the ruling Sandinistas, the Moravian Church was so thoroughly indigenized that according to García it aligned itself with the international Indian movement and thus contributed to the positive reevaluation of the Miskito as Indians. Dennis (2004) believes that the flexibility and adaptability of Miskito culture have been key elements in the group’s survival and cultural resilience.

While Costeños have always been receptive to external elements, they have also fiercely resisted those that are deemed to pose too serious a threat to their regional autonomy. Since the colonial period, Costeños have bitterly contested their incorporation into the Nicaraguan nation. Thus, they have embraced Anglo-Saxon, Indian, Afro-Caribbean, and U.S. regional worlds and influences. While they have refused to adopt Spanish-Catholic Nicaraguan identities (García 1996), it is not uncommon for the most metropolitan people of the region to value their Spanish-language skills as yet another mark of their cultural cosmopolitanism (Pineda 2006). Nevertheless, it is clear that the Costeños have always resisted Nicaraguanization. Drawing on ethnographies conducted with the Miskito in the 1960s, Helms (1969, 82) states that the “Miskito still prefer English-speaking foreigners to Spanish-speaking Nicaraguans and Hondurans, and are not yet effectively incorporated into the national life of those republics.” Indeed, Costeños still sometimes refer to Pacific Nicaraguans as “Spaniards.”

Throughout the twentieth century, Costeños have been subject to the racism of Pacific Nicaraguans. In an official 1927 report on the region for the Managua government, Dr. Frutos Ruiz y Ruiz wrote that

the Mosquitia today is only interesting as an ethnological curiosity; the different races of pure Indians should be studied before their impending disappearance. These Indians have not made the slightest contribution to civilization, and given that there are so few of them, only a few thousand, they are utterly without value. The few blacks, which seem greater in number because it is an under populated country, do not even provide this curiosity because they don’t even have their own language and they are only valued as beasts of burden for foreign companies, which prefer them over the rest of Nicaraguans. (Ruiz y Ruiz 1927, 116, quoted in Pineda 2006, 83)

Ruiz feared that unless a labor force of Mestizo Nicaraguans was transplanted from the Pacific to the Atlantic region to meet the growing needs of U.S. extractive industry there, the Mosquito Coast risked becoming “a museum of races, without patriotism, without tradition, without common ideals, a confusion of languages, of colors, of bloods, of vice” (Ruiz y Ruiz 1927, 116, quoted in Pineda 2006, 85).

Hispanization projects implemented during the Somoza dictatorship (1934–79) aimed to integrate the Atlantic region into the nation and made many Costeños feel ashamed of their languages and cultural identities (García 1996). In the early 1980s,
the Sandinista leaders from the Pacific who wanted to incorporate the people of the Mosquito Coast into the revolutionary struggle often displayed astonishing levels of ignorance and prejudice toward the Costeños and their cultures. Luis Carrión, the Sandinista government representative for the Atlantic Coast in the early 1980s, characterized the Miskito as “an ethnic population that lives in great economic backwardness and which has been subject to a process of cultural imperialism” (Carrión 1983b, 249) and described their language as one that “does not allow for the intellectual and cultural development of people” (Carrión 1983a, 202). By the same token, it is common for Pacific Nicaraguans to regard Creole English as a debased form of the language (Pineda 2006, 84). Minister of the Interior Tomás Borge (1983, 189) told a Mexican magazine that “the Atlantic Coast is an extremely backward sector of the population” dominated by prejudice, ignorance, and religious fanaticism. During the Contra war, the Sandinistas forcibly relocated many of the indigenous communities along the Río Coco to alternative settlements (for discussion, see Nietschmann 1989; Hale 1992; García 1996). Thus, in the 1980s many Costeños took up arms against the revolutionary government. By 1987, as a result of the ethnic militancy (Hale 1992) exerted by the Costeños vis-à-vis the revolution and in partial recognition of the culturally insensitive way in which the Sandinistas had thus far dealt with the Mosquito Coast, an autonomy law was passed that opened the way for a process of development and cultural revitalization within the region (Dennis 2000).

While the autonomy law has led to the creation of new bilingual education programs and representation for the RAAN and the RAAS governments in national legislative spaces and the Costeños have continued to maintain their cultural integrity and languages, significant challenges nevertheless face the region and its inhabitants. Most Costeños believe the implementation of autonomy has been too slow and uneven and that local leaders have been co-opted by the central government (Grigsby 2005; United Nations Development Programme [UNDP] 2005). Moreover, poverty levels on the Mosquito Coast remain unacceptably high. According to Nicaraguan government figures, more than 70% of the RAAN’s population and 63% of those from the RAAS live in extreme poverty (compared with a national average of 36%; Instituto Nicaragüense de Información de Desarrollo 2008, 27). Apart from lobster diving for commercial fishing fleets, there are few job opportunities in Atlantic Nicaragua, and unemployment reaches 90% (Cunningham 2006). In addition, fishing, logging, and mining operations in the region are destroying local biodiversity and producing environmental degradation on an unprecedented scale. The Costeños’ problems are compounded by the fact that rural poverty and environmental abasement in western Nicaragua are generating an intense migratory flow to the Atlantic Coast, a phenomenon that locals call “the Pacific invasion” (UNDP 2005).3 Finally, in September 2007, the region was devastated by Hurricane Felix, a massive category 5 storm.

**BilwiVision**

Television came late to Nicaragua’s Mosquito Coast. Prior to 1990, there was very little TV available at all. After 1990, cable television was established in the region and
a small sector of the population gained access to expanded foreign and some Nicaraguan programming. It was not until 2000 that all Pacific Nicaraguan channels became available on the Atlantic Coast. Costeños nevertheless show high levels of cultural competency with respect to media use. For example, the region has a well established tradition of participatory radio. Many stations offer open mike sessions where anybody can come and have a say about political issues that concern them. People often use these opportunities to communicate with local leaders, particularly when they feel that other efforts to lobby authorities have failed. In many cases, such complaints force politicians to respond in kind. As the owner of Bilwi community radio station Kabu Yula told us,

We put up Kabu Yula so that anyone in the vicinity of Puerto Cabezas and the villages around Puerto Cabezas that has something to say to the government and their word can’t go through different channels, Kabu Yula is there for that. They will come here, we will offer them, you know, some time on the radio, we’ll give it to them and their word can be heard in this way, and it has worked. It has worked a lot.

This vision of local media activity as a community advocacy, development, and political lobbying tool has now been extended to television. As we were told by one member of a new Bilwi TV production collective concerned particularly with developing a youth-oriented approach to multicultural broadcasting, local community residents “have come to view media as a kind of tribunal which can both appeal and raise awareness,” so these people “come to us, to get us to publicize their problem. They get us to travel to their community, and take some shots, and then we broadcast to the rest of the region and to the authorities so that people can see what is really going on in the communities.” Examples of the sorts of issues involved include inadequate community access to water, shortages of medicine, and racial discrimination in health care provision. “They’ve tried to let the relevant authorities know about the problem and they’ve been ignored. So then they come to us.” These communities and video producers thus represent a “new wave” of indigenous Latin Americans “who are taking the question of media democracy to the next level” (Salazar and Córdova 2008, 42).

Costeños also have politically valuable experience in using new media technologies to protect their areas and promote self-determination. In the 1990s, for instance, they successfully collaborated with a group of geographers and marine scientists to map their land and sea territories using a combination of traditional knowledges and high-tech methods involving GPS, GIS, and Hi-8 video (Nietschmann 1995). Such activities, like those of the Zapatistas of Chiapas, who have also mobilized global media technologies to forge far-flung alliances for a place-based indigenous political struggle, demonstrate that there is “no necessary contradiction between technological modernization and grassroots mobilization” (Yúdice 2003, 106; also see Halleck 1994). Along with the Zapatistas, the Kayapo, the Inuit, and other indigenous communities, then, Costeños are becoming increasingly aware of the ways in which
media-based modes of activism across boundaries can be sources of visibility, protection, and leverage (Halkin 2008, 164). By extending existing spaces of territorial visualization and discursive production and circulation, contemporary media technologies help to generate and energize new political projects and imaginaries and thus facilitate the formation of alternative indigenous modernities (Salazar and Córdova 2008, 52).

BilwiVision (see Figure 2) began in 2005 as a project that emerged with the support of the local university URACCAN, based in the port city of Bilwi in the RAAN, in connection with the school’s Institute of Intercultural Communication; the station is thus seen as a key tool for the promotion of interculturality. BilwiVision broadcasts a mixture of locally made programs and imported content. Local productions are broadcast in all of the region’s languages and deal with pressing cultural and political issues such as the struggle for autonomy, cross-cultural communication, indigenous traditions and festivals, the role of traditional medicine, bilingual education, environmental management, and disasters. Many local productions are news and current affairs shows, some of which feature a magazine format involving interviews with Costeño elders, politicians, intellectuals, and healers as well as ordinary people. Interviewees are encouraged to speak in the language with which they are most comfortable; the
station later adds subtitles for the benefit of viewers who speak only one of the region’s other languages.

The question of language is of central concern to BilwiVision mediamakers, who see the channel as a valuable tool for linguistic protection and rejuvenation. BilwiVision was the first television channel to broadcast programs in Miskitu, and it has recently been joined by another. While the Miskitu language is widely spoken in the region, it has historically enjoyed lower prestige than both Spanish and Creole English, which, because of U.S. companies’ preference for local submanagers with English, often gave Creoles easier access than Miskitos to higher wages and social status (Pineda 2006). Parental support for instruction in Miskitu has long been weak, for nowadays many believe their children must become proficient in Spanish if they are to get ahead. Miskito mediamaker and intellectual Avelino Cox recognizes that his TV program *Titan Yami* (“Good Morning”) is an important vehicle in the struggle to strengthen the status of Miskitu in the region and to get it heard in the Pacific as well (e.g., by raising Mestizo awareness of Miskitu place names). Avelino makes a point of using Miskitu words that have fallen into disuse and even coins new ones (e.g., *ayaputka* for “computer”) to provide the people with names for things their ancestors did not have. While Miskito parents believe their children should develop linguistic competence in Spanish, Costeños are concerned by what they see as the growing españolización o mestizización (presence of Spanish-speaking Mestizo culture) in regional political bodies (Grigsby 2005). Now local television helps to constitute a countervailing tendency by expanding multilingual discursive spaces on the Mosquito Coast. As one young Miskito broadcaster told us,

> Being indigenous people, we want to exist within our heritage and our native tongue, but there is not the fluid space in which to do this. So we feel affected not just as journalists and indigenous communicators but also on behalf of our people. It’s true there are lots of indigenous people who speak Spanish in an everyday kind of way (*de una manera popular*). But there are lots of expressions they don’t understand. But in our native tongue they do. It’s the same problem for the Creole population, they need space. We have to communicate in the native languages of the different peoples.

Community intellectuals, storytelling, and public narration are central to Miskito cultural politics. The public narration of traditional legends and stories, the *kisi nani*, by community intellectuals has been important for the formation and reformulation of Miskito identities over time (García 1996; Offen 2003). Such didactic narratives have played a key role in the process of reassessing and updating the past and in the production of “people’s mundane and supernatural experiences of place” (Offen 2003, 387). Karl Offen found that these narratives have therefore helped mobilize their audiences to participate as citizens in community activities such as a mapping project designed to assist in Miskito land claims. Now, student videomakers from the Mosquito Coast produce video dramas that enact the *kisi nani* for broadcast on BilwiVision. According to Avelino Cox, who incorporates these and other didactic narratives into
programming he creates for the channel, the kisi nani make for good TV that effectively stimulates oral cultural activity and promotes community connectedness and identity among audience members.

One of BilwiVision’s main aims has been the promotion of intercultural communication both within the region and beyond. In particular, it is hoped that TV can help to mitigate interethnic tensions and conflicts within the RAAN and promote greater understanding of Costeño cultures among Pacific Nicaraguans. Aracelly Reyna Duarte, BilwiVision’s director, sees television as a crucial means for the enhancement of regional multiculturalism:

We want an intercultural presentation that we can identify with the RAAN. I’m interested in this because the Miskito have their own culture, how they treat illnesses and so on, and so do the Creoles and so do the Mayangnas. Just as we Mestizos do. We share these things with other people. I might not belong to black culture, but I can get to know it through television. Through this kind of sharing and exchange, we can make the multiculturalism we have in this region a reality. We have to learn to respect each other.

One successful program that demonstrates this interculturalist approach to broadcasting strategy is the show *La comunidad en su casa* ("The Community in Your Home"), whose film crews produce visual ethnographies that, in Aracelly’s words, “bring the everyday lives of our communities to the screen.” In this way, the RAAN’s communities gain an opportunity to record their local histories, customs, and struggles and share them with others in a manner that at one time in the region was reserved almost exclusively for the “big cities with beautiful fountains that the international channels broadcast to us” (Duarte, personal interview). In the process, community members learn new ways of imagining how to present themselves to others, a mode of imagination that on one level enhances the conditions for intercultural understanding and dialogical exchange and on another level, as Aracelly notes, potentially serves the economic development purpose of allowing communities to consider activities such as the promotion of tourist visitation as a strategy for improving their living conditions. In this way, the RAAN’s communities reaffirm their sense of cosmopolitanism by reimagining themselves as “inscribers of globalization” (Flusty 2004, 103). Indeed, the media interculturalism associated with shows such as *La comunidad en su casa* can be seen as a way of expanding citizenship practices by promoting education and engagement around the region’s cultures, histories, and politics and facilitating in newly proliferating media spaces the articulation of place-based understandings and political challenges. Community video production both documents and enters into intercultural political processes, and the “activity of making programs can be, in itself, a beginning step in civic engagement” that may assume other forms as well (Halleck 2002, 391).

BilwiVision (see Figure 3) is also a tool through which Costeños can connect and form solidarities with community and indigenous groups across the Americas and elsewhere, as the mutual circulation of media material enables different and geographically

distant groups of people to find each other (Halleck 2002, 391). BilwiVision has been working with indigenous groups in Mexico, Guatemala, Ecuador, and Panama to exchange ideas and media products. It is also a partner in the VIVA! Project, a transnational community arts exchange and popular education program based at York University, Canada. The intensified geographical connectedness that results is a source of solidarity not only across but within national borders, for the engagements with pan-indigenous, Fourth World understandings that projects such as VIVA! help to promote benefit interculturalism inside the RAAN by enhancing mutual understanding among Costeños of the challenges facing the region’s different groups.4

The VIVA! Project includes partner groups in Panama, Mexico, the United States, and Canada, in addition to BilwiVision. In VIVA!’s collaborative video, Community Arts and Popular Education in the Americas (2007),5 those involved are clear about VIVA!’s aims to advance decolonization and other emancipatory social transformations, solidarities both within and across differences and borders, creative responses to disempowering political circumstances, and dialogical, mutually informing relations between local and transnational objectives. Says Maggie Hutcheson of Toronto, “All of the places in the VIVA! Project share a colonial history in which some stories have been made official and other stories have really been marginalized. And each project aims to resist that and to speak back to that. But how we do that depends on

Figure 3. Inside the BilwiVision studio
our different contexts. We do that in different ways in different places.” Olmo Flores of Mexico City adds that VIVA! “teaches us a sense of solidarity, through which we can learn from each other’s struggles, so that each of us in our own contexts can understand and transform our own reality.” In this way, VIVA! helps to facilitate the examination and enhanced understanding of, as another voice in the DVD puts it, “the tensions that we call ‘creative tensions,’ which are the social tensions that provoke creative responses from the people who experience them.” Such perspectives as these can readily be grasped as elements of a counterinscription of cultural globalization. As Avelino told us,

We are trying to make a small indigenous globalization in the face of the large globalization. It’s part of our survival. For example, in Panama we’ve had meetings with the Kuna on history and culture. We’ve done the same in Guatemala. At the end of this month, I’m going to be traveling to Ecuador to film a meeting on intercultural bilingual education. So in this way we are building links and coordinating our efforts.

In ways such as these, BilwiVision helps to produce and maintain border passages and to promote more fluid understandings of boundaries. With reference to interactions between Miskitos in Nicaragua and Honduras, which are intensifying through the work of BilwiVision, Avelino notes that

for us, the indigenous people, there has never been a border. The border is in the mind of governments. In spite of this barrier, we never broke relations, although they have been a little surreptitious, half clandestine, but we never broke our relations. But now it is more open, because the Honduran people have also gained awareness, we are working together, so that at least in culture there are no borders for anybody. So we are working on issues of education, health, children, women... we are exploring our problems together through these forums.

Avelino’s comments to us suggest that BilwiVision is helping to catalyze the Costeños’ “small indigenous globalization” and thus to challenge entrenched institutional knowledges that reify borders and national spaces. Such disruptive enactments can also potentially contribute to the transformation of historically established racial knowledges among Pacific Nicaraguans concerning the indigenous and Afro-descendant peoples of the Mosquito Coast. Avelino describes the situation as follows:

For the people in the Pacific, nothing that the Costeños do is worthwhile. Unfortunately this is how they think, it’s an historic problem. We are trying to deal with a centuries-old problem. But they don’t know the Atlantic Coast in the first place. In the second place, they believe that Costeños are not capable of thought. In the third place, they think there are no intellectuals here, that there are no researchers. This is a problem which really affects our communication with the Pacific.
Like indigenous and Afro-descendant groups around the world, Costeños have been subject to colonizing, damaging, and inaccurate filmic representation (see, e.g., Buchsbaum 2003). BilwiVision’s mediamakers know that their operations work to counteract Pacific Nicaraguan misunderstandings of the Mosquito Coast and that Mestizo culture has much to learn from the Costeños. While Avelino travels to the Pacific to give talks on Mosquito Coast cultures whenever possible, the high cost of such travel for Costeños tends to be prohibitive; in this regard, television production and digital distribution via DVDs and the world wide web offer highly attractive and relatively affordable means for the promotion of interculturalism across and beyond the regions.

There are undoubtedly significant barriers to BilwiVision’s work. Like indigenous and community media operations throughout the world, the station faces constant funding issues, insufficient equipment and technical support, and competition from programs produced by global media corporations that reach the region via cable. In addition, very few of the RAAN’s people outside the capital city of Bilwi have access to TV at all; indeed, the more remote rural communities of Nicaragua’s Atlantic Coast still have neither paved roads nor electricity. While some material can be accessed at any time on DVD, Avelino believes BilwiVision must consider producing some of its shows in a broadcast radio format to reach a larger audience. Despite such issues, the station has won widespread support and praise from locals. Avelino notes that he receives considerable gratitude, often expressed in letters, from Costeños who have learned about local cultural histories and customs through BilwiVision and are thankful for the opportunity to watch television in their own languages. As well, BilwiVision’s user participants have been constant sources of new programming ideas, which they do not hesitate to communicate to the channel.

**Appropriating Globalization and Producing (Trans)local Identities**

Globalizing processes on the coast undoubtedly include a number of oppressive and disempowering dimensions. We are, for example, critically aware of the damage being done to subsistence livelihoods and local ecosystems by the global commercial over-exploitation of the region’s environmental resources and by the pressures on the region generated by outside actors. We should not however lose sight of the demonstrated capacities of Costeño cultures, traditions, and identities for creative adaptation and survival in the face of globalization’s various historical forms of predation. The globalization of Costeño cultures should not then in itself be viewed as a threat to their integrity, as it is evident that globalizing processes have historically been important means of cultural production, preservation, and regeneration for Costeños. Indeed, synthesization has enabled cultural traditions to survive and new, more resilient ones to emerge. Even the exploitation of both labor and environment associated with the extractive capitalist economy and Moravian missionization did not devour the cultures of the Mosquito Coast, which effectively adapted to these pressures. Indeed, some
traditions that seemed to be vanishing are now reappearing, in part through the cultural magics of television. For example, the celebration of Sihku-Tara, a feast that Avelino describes as “the Miskito equivalent of Halloween” held in honor of the dead and involving “gastronomy, dancing, singing and traditions,” was waning because of church disapproval but has been successfully resurrected in the communities of the Mosquito Coast and through its airwaves.

Thus, it is important to underscore the historical receptiveness of the Costeños to global influences, their embrace of and self-identification with cosmopolitanism, and the potential that television has for remaking the local in politically significant ways. And as we have argued, we must remember to think about the RAAN as a site from which globality is extended and not just one into which it intrudes (Flusty 2004). In our view, BilwiVision constitutes a key component of a new set of techniques for the projection of place into global space and thus the extension of social and cultural relations from the RAAN. For instance, some Costeños have begun using new media resources such as YouTube, a form of DIY global media production, to circulate Mosquito Coast material that asserts cultural and political autonomy and counters problematic stereotypes of the region and its people.

Religious organizations and missionaries are an important source of imagery from the “Third World” for the people of the (over)developed West. Consider the contrasts between the coast’s representation in a video made by Forward Edge International, “a faith-based missions and relief organization,” and those that can be found in Costeño-produced material available on YouTube and from other sources such as the VIVA! Project. The missionary video is filled with images of desperation, dominated by ones depicting Costeños as hapless victims and passive recipients of aid. Says the narrator’s voice-over, “This is Puerto Cabezas, a port town on the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua. It is an incredibly dangerous place, ruled by drug traffickers, murderers and corruption.” The video includes a brief account of a homeless boy who was left at the Bilwi hospital after being gang raped and notes that “within days of this footage, Miguel was back on the streets, exposed to the sexual diseases and evil that fills Puerto Cabezas”; the final words of this U.S.-accented voice-over narration are spoken over the animalizing image of a shirtless Latino street tough who stares confrontationally into the camera. We are subsequently taken to a village located sixty miles north of Bilwi, where, we are told by the narrator, “life is hard and life is short.” Suddenly, the video cuts to cavalry-like images of a boatload of missionaries speeding to the rescue as the narrator tells us that “every year a group of volunteers come eighty miles up river, bringing doctors, medicine and food for the people. It is a beautiful expression of God’s love.” However well intentioned the missionaries behind this video may be, whose aid is undoubtedly both immensely valuable to and appreciated by the Costeños they reach, this is a classic instance of an imperializing and “othering” representation that inscribes developed world meanings on the developing one (“meanings that bear, as their unspoken obverse, the superiority” of the former); this video depicts “the ‘third’ world as the terrain where the power of the ‘first’ is quite properly exercised” (Fiske 2003, 278). Such representations of the developing world diverge sharply from
the grassroots mobilizing, community-oriented VIVA! Project video discussed earlier and also, for instance, from the King Pulanka festival YouTube video produced at Lamlaya on the outskirts of Bilwi in January 2009. The latter shows a vibrant and colorful community preparing for the centuries-old festival, then laughing, smiling, singing, and dancing to the music of guitars, percussion instruments, and firecrackers.

Similarly, the video “BilwiVision: A Community TV Channel” (2007) is filled with images of a vibrant city with an active cultural life that includes dances, parades, performances, and public spaces bustling with daily vitality. We see local people going to school, registering to vote, fishing, editing video footage, and navigating busy marketplaces. The video includes, at one point, the following calypso-inflected song lyrics:

Seeds and fruit of different cultures
Keep struggling for autonomy.
Different colors and different speaking
But one in nationality.
A right to rescue
A motherland with culture and traditionally
Free autonomy and true democracy
Self-governing for you and me.
Autonomy, autonomy
We need autonomy.
Autonomy and true democracy
Self-governing the Caribbean Sea.

By the same token, the depiction of desperation, victimization, and passive reception of Christian charity in the Forward Edge film contrasts just as sharply with the internet video of Bilwi Creole musician Remigio Hodgson’s song “Autonomy.” Hodgson sings,

I don’t know what to do,
I don’t know what to say.
I saw my people struggling hard
For their right by day and night.
You can hear it on the radio.
You can see it on the TV.
How my people are struggling hard
For their right by day and night.
Autonomy, autonomy
All we want is our autonomy. . .
Politician people made the rules.
Politic people know they rule.
All we want is our autonomy.
Such videos now compete with those from sources such as missionary organizations to depict the Mosquito Coast differently in global online media; they capitalize on, participate in, and advance the development of convergent media cultures to circulate counterinscriptions of a grassroots globalization that projects a sense of place and that struggles to reinvent both the region’s cosmopolitan ideal and its related, more recently developed ethos of contemporary multiculturalism. Each video in its own way advances a project of *regional autonomy through global interconnectedness*: the VIVA! DVD by promoting solidarities around the production and exchange of community generated counternarratives that respond creatively to colonizing forces, the Lamlaya festival film by helping to reinvigorate a tradition that explicitly celebrates a cosmopolitanism forged historically through transcultural engagements and alliances among Costeños, England, the United States, and others (see Dennis and Olien 1984), and both the “BilwiVision: A Community TV Channel” video and Hodgson’s autonomy song clip by advocating for the Mosquito Coast’s cultural and political struggles and through Hodgson’s relationship to a sister-city affiliation that has created, among other things, a series of transnational exchanges and a video production training program in Bilwi. This program is supported partly through the sale of Bilwi-made DVDs to diasporic Costeños living in the United States and elsewhere and thus can be understood as a form of entrepreneurial postdevelopment practice, whereby developing-world peoples participate in the production of futures that neither eschew “development” as an objective nor accept the “Washington Consensus” that tries to dictate that “Third World” development should occur on “First World” terms (see, e.g., Cupples, Glynn, and Larios 2007). Dixie Lee, one of our key informants in Bilwi, told us that the DVDs most heavily requested by far by diasporic Costeños are those that feature video footage from the Mosquito Coast set to a soundtrack of U.S. country music (such videos are also an important staple on BilwiVision). Like baseball, country music has been extremely popular on the coast since the era known in the region as “company time” (from the early twentieth century to the Sandinista Revolution), when U.S. businesses were an important source of local incomes, economic vibrance, cultural cosmopolitanism, and a highly valued general sense of movimiento or “action” that pervaded everyday life (Pineda 2006, 125). It seems that both current Mosquito Coast residents and diasporic Costeños use these Bilwi-made country music videos to recapture and mobilize a sense of this cosmopolitan movimiento in the present.

Like indigenous media operations elsewhere in the world and with them, Costeños are now actively producing and maintaining new modes of local and global interconnectedness that involve heterogeneous, geographically and historically dispersed elements and spaces in the formation and proliferation of associations that both draw on and contribute to, among other things, local and global discourses of indigeneity, interculturalism, bilingual education, autonomy, self-determination, and land rights. The production and circulation both within and beyond Nicaragua of Bilwi-made videos bring into being new kinds of “hyperextended social relationships” (Flusty 2004, 10). Such relationships illustrate some of the ways in which indigenous media practices entail the creation not just of texts but of often renewed, reworked, and distinctive
modes of sociality (see, e.g., Ginsburg 2003; Glynn and Tyson 2007). Indigenous and Afro-Nicaraguan media therefore contribute to the Mosquito Coast’s educative, community and cultural citizenship formation processes and to the region’s cultural vibrance. As Costeño Jeyner Zabala says, “I’ve noticed how often BilwiVision covers events and cultural affairs that take place within the communities” of the region. Brigette Lampson adds that BilwiVision is a “local channel that gives the opportunity to express our interests whenever we have any kind of problem. . . . We can express our own cultures locally.” Cintia Miguel, who produces a community-based BilwiVision program about Afro-Caribbean issues, notes that “the Creole community . . . are very glad and proud of this channel. They are very enthusiastic. . . . The people feel that they are identified through this channel.” By the same token, Sasha Marley, coordinator of the Center for Studies and Information about Women at URACCAN, states that before the arrival of BilwiVision, local women “did not have much access to mass media,” but now the channel has created spaces where women can “place and see ourselves within what’s happening at the regional level, and therefore see ourselves within what’s happening at the national and international levels”; media have thus become “part of the development and growth that we are seeking for the region.” Regarding the station’s involvement with the international VIVA! Project, BilwiVision editor Marlon Beer says, “We feel so proud that we have a relationship. It’s, for me, new because I’m just working in BilwiVision something like four months ago, so I hope in the future we can . . . change ideas, you know. I change my indigenous idea with the Canadian people and all over the world.”

Appadurai (1996, 179–81) argues that while locality is often taken to be a “given,” it is in fact “an inherently fragile social achievement” whose production and maintenance require continuous effort. Seen from this perspective, it becomes possible to understand numerous material features associated with the cultures of everyday life (e.g., lawns, homes, and sidewalks) not as “ends in themselves” but rather as “moments in a general technology . . . of localization” whose primary consequences and outcomes include the production of local knowledges, subjects, and “locality as a structure of feeling.” This general technology would thus include a range of “complex and deliberate practices of performance, representation, and action” whereby “space and time are themselves socialized and localized.” The activities of BilwiVision and other Mosquito Coast media production and circulation practices should similarly be seen as important elements within a broader process whereby contemporary Costeños work to localize and socialize time and space and thus to rework existing structures of feeling and to generate and circulate new modes of local and translocal knowledges and subjectivities. Such networked, multiscalar, translocalizing practices carry the potential to extend and enhance the necessarily mutual production of local knowledges, subjects, and (trans)localities wherein those subjects “can be produced, named, and empowered to act socially” (Appadurai 1996, 181).

Appadurai (1996, 184–86) notes that localities are always defined by a mix of context-generative and context-driven relational matrices and capacities: localities both create contexts within which meaningful social relations can occur and are created within
the conditions and constraints established by wider contexts. The production of trans-localities, and thus of translocal identities, imaginations, and structures of feeling that are advanced by media practices exemplified by BilwiVision, the VIVA! Project, Remigio Hodgson, and the King Pulanka videomakers and celebrants of Lamlaya, therefore constitute a potentially powerful force for the expansion of the Mosquito Coast’s context-generative capacities and technologies, not least because they contribute to and are abetted by an already existing and expanding wider context characterized by Avelino, as we have seen, as a “small indigenous globalization.” Similar examples of the deployment of mediated translocalization in ways that expand the context-generative capacities of localities include the Zapatistas of Chiapas, mentioned earlier, whose story is now widely known, and the grassroots activist organizations in postapartheid South Africa that have drawn on transnational and multiscalar political communication networks to bring effective pressure for various sorts of change to bear on the national government and other powerful institutions there (Barnett 2004, 70–72). Such examples give us illustrations of the properly political mobilization of capacities (e.g., collective intelligence) that are facilitated by and generated within cultures of media convergence and are often deployed proto-politically by fan groups such as Survivor spoilers (Jenkins 2006a; Bruns 2008). In and around Nicaragua’s Mosquito Coast, mediamaking is being harnessed to ongoing political and cultural struggles, boosting an intensification of intra- and intercultural relationships across and beyond the region and advancing a convergent, grassroots globalization through the production of new (trans)local identities. Programs that involve the exploration and representation of local knowledges, memories, traditions, and political issues such as La comunidad en su casa thus become linked to wider contexts and enable people to participate at different levels, to “jump scale” (see Smith 1992) without leaving home. As Salazar and Córdova (2008, 55) observe, “Indigenous media constitute a system of social relations and networking aimed at reaffirming communal social solidarities, where local conjunctures are increasingly strengthened and linked through transnational strategies and cross-cultural collaborations across national borders.”

Costeños identify with and are known for their historical embrace of hybridities and so are perhaps less likely to succumb to the pressure suffered by some indigenous groups to use media to reify cultural difference and conform to Western notions of cultural authenticity to make political demands (see Conklin 1997). Maybe the Miskito can flaunt and celebrate their hybridity and impurity. “Electronic mediation of a community” produces a “complicated, hybrid sense of local subjectivity” (Appadurai 1996, 197)—a point that applies with extra force in regard to groups that are, like Costeños, only weakly integrated into national imaginaries and subject to forms of internal colonialism. While some indigenous groups across the world have strategically aligned themselves with static and ahistorical First World understandings of indigeneity and environmentalism to gain leverage in land rights claims, a self-conscious awareness of hybridity and cosmopolitanism can also be extremely valuable in resisting the normalizing dualisms that attempt to fix and police subaltern identities; indeed, for such groups, self-presentation as cosmopolitan indigenes can disrupt forms of
predation associated with globalization by facilitating the reconstitution of a space beyond the local–global dualism (Butz 2002; Turner 2002; Pineda 2006).

Costeño histories and cultures that are now being electronically mediated and dispersed pose important challenges to key binaries that have marked Latin American nationalisms since independence. According to Martín Barbero (1998), these binaries are founded on the contradictions of a widespread search for mythical roots that tends to center on rural indigenous people and fails to grasp the dynamism of cultural identities and that simultaneously rejects indigenous knowledges and practices as “superstitious” obstacles to development. As (trans)local television on the Mosquito Coast embraces and extends diverse historical and contemporary hybridities and globalities, we and viewers like us are forced to confront “the impossible purity of the indigenous” (Martín Barbero 1998, 205)—but in a way, we insist, that respects the (hybrid and dynamic) cultural integrity of Costeños. As García Canclini (1993, 45) notes, indigenous cultures “neither can exist with the autonomy supposed by certain anthropologists or folklorists, nor are they simple atypical appendages of an all-devouring capitalism” (quoted in Martín Barbero 1998, 206). The visualization, extension, and projection of indigenous and Afro-Nicaraguan spaces and identities in Costeño media thus challenge “not only the dominant politicolegal structures of the Latin American states but also their cultural foundations” (Salazar and Córdova 2008, 42).

BilwiVision is part of a political and cultural landscape within and from which Costeños struggle to produce space to maneuver vis-à-vis the everyday constraints created by national neglect, poverty, and discrimination. By its production and advancement of translocal connectivities, spaces, and identities, BilwiVision generates, reworks, and sustains contexts for the expansion of indigenous and Afro-Caribbean cultural citizenships. Such forms of citizenship are interesting in part for their contestation of historical exclusion from national imaginaries and simultaneous basis in and promotion of non- and transnational ways of belonging. BilwiVision thus extends the political terrain on which struggles for cultural rights, autonomy, and development are fought as it proliferates mediated hybridities that emerge from historical experiences and identities that are distinctively Costeño ones.

BilwiVision staff and local community leaders note that the regional population has enthusiastically embraced the dialogue-enhancing opportunities afforded by the channel. As Avelino says, “I think that for the first time in communication history, we can speak on TV in our own language. . . . What’s also important about this form is that people can phone in to talk about specific issues. So local people can share what they know.” This is bringing about new levels of awareness and ways of promoting local interests, new forms of cultural expression and intercultural engagement, and new kinds of visibility for the region’s cultures of everyday life. Raúl Barberena calls BilwiVision a “great initiative in popular journalism, in social communication” that works with “different sectors of the population,” including the “economic sector” and “the various social sectors, so the community gets to know and participate in” its programming.13 These developments are therefore beginning to create favorable conditions for more widespread kinds of cultural activism, political
mobilization, and social transformation—in a word, for movimiento. As URACCAN Secretary General Albert St’Claire puts it,

We are changing our situation; we are changing it because the people we work with have influence at the national level. . . . They . . . participate in editorial boards in national mass media enterprises in Mangua. This is why we work in communications. Why is video important? Because we have to see ourselves . . . we have to see what’s happening. It’s not enough to hear it, we have to see what’s happening in [Costeño communities such as] Siuna, what’s happening in San Juan, what’s happening in Waspam. We have to interact more. I think that one of our strategic problems, which has deterred us, is that there isn’t much communication or movement between the Pacific region of Nicaragua and the coastal region. So, through TV we want to improve that.14

There is some evidence that the changes underway on the Mosquito Coast deserve to be understood in conjunction with the broader dynamics that have been, as Arturo Escobar (2010) has elaborated in a sweeping and important recent analysis, “stirring up a new politics of the virtual, of worlds and knowledges otherwise” (p. 46) and thus relativizing, contesting, and disrupting modernity’s dualist ontologies in favor of indigenous and Afro-descendant relational ones in a number of places across Latin America.15 Hence, a new set of interrelated social, cultural, and political movements organized around a multiform series of decolonial articulations is actively challenging and partially displacing neoliberal hegemony while “opening up the political spectrum” of the region to developments that extend “beyond Eurocentric frameworks” (Escobar 2010, 6). While the consequences of these potentially epochal transformations in Latin America have so far produced a highly unclear, uncertain, uneven, contradictory, and ambivalent set of situations on the ground, they have also, at particular moments in places such as Chiapas, Oaxaca, and Bolivia, unleashed imaginative energies and forces of intercultural movement that carry an astonishing, “polyphonic social capacity . . . to disorganize the constituted order on the basis of their own organizational forms, reinventing and proposing new rules of the game” (Linsalata 2008, quoted in Escobar 2010, 38). Although he does not mention media, Escobar’s powerful analysis of these remarkable developments helps us to grasp in a new way the importance and the potential of indigenous media operations and the intercultural global networks within which they are implicated. For these key forces of cultural persistence, social reimagination, and the assertion of epistemic alterity carry potent energies capable of significantly contributing to the relativization and displacement of the world’s Euro-modernist ontologies and the crisis-ridden regimes of neoliberalism they support.

On April 18, 2009, the Convention of the Council of Elders of the Nation of Moskitia, representing 375 Mosquito Coast communities, declared the region’s independence from Nicaragua, on the basis of the UN Universal Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007), and elected three of its members to serve as spiritual guides for the independence movement. Four days later, the movement seized the Bilwi building
that houses regional government officials (who are widely considered by locals to be too detached from coastal community interests and to have sold out to the Sandinista-controlled Nicaraguan central government) and announced the impending formation of the “Government of the Communitarian Nation of Moskitia,” which was to have its own army and council of ministers. Representatives of the movement also expressed an intention to suspend oil exploration within the region, articulated their opposition to resource extraction concessions granted by Managua to foreign consortia, rejected in principle the exploitative treatment of the region’s workers and natural resources by multinational corporations, and demanded the restoration of traditional fishing rights and practices. They gave the Ortega government six months to recognize the Moskitia’s independence.

These developments were the product of long-simmering resentments dating at least as far back as the annexation of the Moskitia by Managua in 1894. In 1983, during the civil war, Costeño leaders also declared the region’s independence from both Sandinismo and Somozismo; in other words, the popularity of the U.S.-backed Contras on the Mosquito Coast was similarly driven by desires for regional autonomy (Campbell and Campbell 2009; Simpson 2009). The current Ortega government has by no means recognized the newly declared Communitarian Government of the Moskitia; indeed, they responded with violence to the uprising that marked the expiration of the six-month deadline declared by Costeño leaders. Managua has, however, been forced to acknowledge some of the Costeños’ grievances and some inadequacies in the existing autonomy laws; for example, the pace at which Costeño communities have gained ancestral land titles seems to have quickened since the start of 2009, and there is hope this will eventually help to mitigate impacts of the “Pacific invasion” (see López 2009).

While we do not wish to overstate the prospect that these emergent popular energies, social movements, and developments on the Mosquito Coast will bring about a decisive realignment of forces to the radical detriment of neoliberalism, the historical weight of which is surely considerable (cf., Escobar 2010, 46), it is worth noting their relationship to a wider Latin American conjuncture marked by serious threats to neoliberal hegemony and ongoing ruptures in Euro-modern dualist ontologies that were once much more stable. As Escobar (2010, 30) notes, Evo Morales’s history-making election to the presidency of Bolivia in 2006 was the product of “a wave of unprecedented popular uprisings characterized by a strong presence of indigenous groups” throughout the preceding five years. And while we do not wish to make excessively strong claims about the role of BilwiVision and other Costeño media in bringing about the developments and transformations of the present moment, we do wish to point toward their role in amplifying and broadening the revivification, assertion, and extended circulation of relational, nonmodern ontologies and in helping to connect the communities of the Moskitia with one another and with indigenous media networks and movements across the Americas. They have facilitated and intensified the processes of interculturalism, which also lie at the heart of the Bolivian social reimaginations and transformation actions of recent years. The presence of
intercultural media networks on the Mosquito Coast enables individual communities to more readily appreciate that, for instance, particular problems they might otherwise regard as isolated are in fact components of broader issues that operate on a scale pertinent to the region as a whole. Media are central to the practices of imagination in the contemporary world and therefore core to the processes whereby societies today must struggle to reimage their futures along different trajectories. As Escobar (2010, 13) notes, social movements “do not exist only as empirical objects ‘out there’ carrying out ‘protests’ but in their enunciations and knowledges, as a potentiality of how politics and the world could be, and as a sphere of action in which people can dream of a better world and contribute to enact it.” BilwiVision and other Mosquito Coast media are asserting hybrid, nonmodern cultural formations and relational ontologies that are helping to disrupt Euro–modernist visions of a universally marketed, individuated, neoliberal social regime. These media are not the “cause” of the recent uprisings in the Moskitia, but they are surely component parts of the broader conjunctural forces and the widespread sense of regional movimiento that have helped create the conditions for the occurrence of these uprisings. And so a final, currently irresolvable question comes into view: “Can the emergent cultural-political subjects in Latin America reach an activated and stable condition of alterity capable of re-constituting socio-natural structures from within, along the lines of decoloniality, relationality and pluriversality?” (Escobar 2010, 47–48). To which we reply: please stay tuned.

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Notes
1. In this article we follow Baron Pineda’s (2006, 227–28n6) practice, adopted for analytical clarity, of using the term Miskito to designate a “socio-racial category” of identification, Miskitu to name the language used by those who identify with this category, and Mosquito to refer to a region along the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua and Honduras. Pineda notes that over the past two decades or so, the term Miskitu has increasingly been used in place of Miskito to name both the language and people as a consequence of debates between linguists over
whether or not the language contains the letter o. Pineda writes that “it is reasonable to claim that Miskitu has an o by virtue of the fact that Miskitu speakers often believe that their language has an o. The case of the Miskitu o provides an example of modern cultural politics in the region in which some Costeño and others are attempting to conceptually purify socio-racial categories that in practice are flexible.”

2. According to Dennis and Olien (1984), the Miskito would trade local goods in return for titles such as Lord Rodney or Lord Nelson, and they acquired foreign goods to live in “right English gentleman fashion” (Roberts 1827/1965, quoted in Helms 1983, 189).

3. Low-income Mestizo subsistence farmers from the Pacific, often unaware of indigenous environmental management practices, are occupying areas of land in an attempt to grow crops for personal consumption. In many cases, the occupied lands are not suited to intensive agriculture (unlike most Pacific soils) and belong to indigenous groups. This situation is creating significant tensions in the region.

4. See, for example, García (1996) on the beneficial impacts of the Moravian Church’s promotion on the Mosquito Coast of pan-indigenous perspectives.

5. A version of this video is available at http://www.vimeo.com/1968807.


7. This video is available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8HA-2Y4FUXM.

8. This video is available at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sSax63Evujk.

9. This video is available at http://www.vimeo.com/1539028.

10. This video is available at http://dan-photolounge.blogspot.com.


15. Escobar (2010, 6) notes that Euro-modern, dualist ontologies create a “world as universe” that upholds “the primacy of humans over non-humans (separation of nature and culture) and of some humans over others (the colonial divide between us and them); the idea of the autonomous individual separated from community; the belief in objective knowledge, reason, and science as the only valid modes of knowing; and the cultural construction of ‘the economy’ as an independent realm of social practice, with ‘the market’ as a self-regulating entity outside of social relations.” By contrast, nonmodern, relational ontologies create a “world as pluriverse” that emphasizes “relationality and reciprocity; the continuity between the natural, the human and the supernatural . . . ; the embeddedness of the economy in social life and the restricted character of the market; and a deeply relational worldview that shapes the notions of personhood, community, economy, and politics.”

16. Our information about these events is drawn from Alvarez (2009), Bárcenas (2009), and Potosme (2009).
References


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