Conflict, Change and Social Relations in a Costa Rican Border Village:

An Ethnographic Study of Delta, Costa Rica

Chelsea Good Abbas

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy under the Executive Committee of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

2020
Abstract

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This research examined the political narratives of national leaders regarding an international border dispute between Costa Rica and Nicaragua from 2010-2015 and the subsequent social relations in an affected border village known as Delta, Costa Rica. Based on eighteen months of qualitative and quantitative ethnographic research conducted on the binational border, this work documents political discourses about the conflicted territory, referred to as Isla Calero or Isla Portillos, through first-hand interviews with national figures and military officials central to the conflict. These discourses are then juxtaposed to the lived realities in the village through an ethnographic analysis of social relations and community happenings amid this conflict. Particular attention is paid to the patrón-peon relationship between Costa Rican farm owners and Nicaraguan migrant workers, and how this relation exists in the midst of an unprecedented influx of police, military personnel, and security infrastructure beginning in 2010.

To accomplish this goal, the first section of this work provides a detailed report of the rapid changes and security developments that took place in the community of Delta, Costa Rica. An analysis of the different political discourses and narratives to justify these rapid actions follows. The local reality of how this conflict was experienced by villagers of Delta, Costa Rica
comprises the second half of this work in the form of an ethnographic account of the social relations and daily interactions between landowners, migrant workers, and the National Police in the border community. The findings highlight the disconnect between national-level political narratives and local experiences of conflict and how a transborder identity supersedes constructed barriers based on nationality, race, ethnicity, language, and even notions of (il)legality.
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to begin by acknowledging, with the deepest of gratitude, the guidance, patience and support of my professors and mentors. Thank you, Dr. Victoria Sanford, for always believing in me and teaching me by example what it means to be a fearless, female anthropologist. Thank you, Dr. Frances Negrón-Muntaner, for your unparalleled guidance and insight in academia and beyond. I want to thank Dr. Anthony Glascock, who first introduced me to the field of anthropology at Drexel University and whose continued support over the years means so much. Thank you also to the faculty at Teachers College, in particular, Professors Hope Leichter, Nicholas Limerick, Charles Harrington, and the late Dr. George Bond.

I owe much to the people of Delta, Costa Rica who accepted me into their homes and lives. I carry with me the sweet laughter and play of the school children who allowed me to be their teacher. Thank you, Doña Olga, for taking me under your wing and always looking out for my best interest.

Thank you to my amazing doctoral cohort, Meghan Chidsey, Sarah French Brennan, Daniel Souleles, Ann Iwashita and Laura Bunting-Hudson, for your brilliant minds and lively spirits; and to my lifelong friend and colleague, Karen Velasquez, for the best memories and always reminding me to feel life.

I greatly appreciate the support of Teachers College and Columbia University in the form of scholarships and grants to support my research through the Institute of Latin American Studies and the Earth Institute. Opportunities to work as a teaching assistant and researcher at The Center for the Study of Ethnicity and Race were invaluable to my professional development.
I am blessed to have the unwavering love and support of my family. Thank you to my best friend and husband who lovingly follows me around the globe. Allie, Addison and Wiley thank you for late nights on the front porch and for always being there. Dad, thank you for driving me and my cohort to Montreal so we could conference and speculate about the world. Thank you for teaching me to question and critique the world and to follow my passions. How did you know that, like you, I would learn to love to learn? Mom, thank you for pushing me to be my best and to work hard. Your relentless support gifted me with the confidence, independence and strength I needed to “finish my paper” and navigate life.

Lastly, I would like to acknowledge my beloved advisor and mentor, Dr. Lambros Comitas, who was always there- waiting for me to arrive unannounced in triumph or in tears. Thank you for caring about my work, for reading every word and draft, even at the end when I know it was hard for you. Thank you for teaching me to love fieldwork, my students and Friday pachangas. Thank you for pushing me when I needed it and for seeing me through to the finish line. I am forever indebted to your gracious guidance and can only hope to someday meet the world as you did, welcoming every wandering soul and compelling curiosity with a lighthearted smile. I will miss you dearly.
For my mother and father.

For Dr. Comitas – whose journey to Ithaca continues to inspire.
I. INTRODUCTION

This dissertation explored the national-level political narratives and social relations that shaped life in the rural border village of Delta, Costa Rica during a period of conflict and rapid change from 2010-2015. Situated within the context of an international border dispute between the Costa Rican and Nicaraguan governments, my work provides a glimpse into how the Costa Rican Border Police, Nicaraguan migrant workers, and Costa Rican landowners uniquely experienced the conflict, each other, and even “the border” on a daily basis. The detailed relational dynamics presented here exhibit how these distinct social groupings worked together to accomplish major community projects, compete for authority, manage labor relations, and construct a local identity determining who does and does not “belong.” The ethnographic examples presented in this work document the socio-cultural particularities of how this border village functioned during a period of conflict and rapid change. Considering the nature of these groups, these data contribute to a broader empirical understanding of border policing, national security, issues surrounding immigration, local notions of community, and other socio-cultural realities of border zones.

At the same time, this dissertation also attempted to demonstrate how larger processes, particularly the politicization and narratives of conflict, affected the community and people under study. For this reason, attention was paid to how political leaders employ nationalistic narratives to shape and re-make a centuries-old conflict to serve their political interests and thus how their politicking manifests in the lives of border residents. The narratives presented here are based on firsthand accounts obtained through interviews with politicians and decision makers pivotal to the border conflict. They are crucial to understanding local social phenomena in the border region because these nationalistic narratives were employed to justify huge shifts in
policy, expenditures, military strategies, and other plans of national action that surfaced in the local context. In Costa Rica, some examples of this included re-creating and re-instating a border police force, implementing massive development projects, and undertaking extravagant initiatives to protect and rebuild the environment.

The following approach, which is both top-down and bottom-up, looks at the orchestrators of the conflict and thus also at the resulting local-level social phenomena. Such an approach to a community study results in a descriptive contribution to the literature that is rooted in the community and its people, yet still tied to larger national and global issues, narratives, and events. My work was partially in response to Alvarez’s (1995) call for “more ethnographic work that specifically focuses on the role of the border in order to tease out the ways in which the myriad types of people negotiate life” in a border region (462). The conclusions that follow clearly display the disconnect between politically charged nationalistic narratives of conflict and community-level experienced realities on the border. Identifying this discord stresses the importance of policy initiatives being driven by empirically observed data and not nationalistic fervor or unrelated politically opportunistic rationales, which I would argue is too often the case. Understanding and documenting these different ways of ‘negotiating life’ in border regions is a first step in providing evidence that can be drawn upon to create more humanitarian-focused border and immigration policies both in the context of Costa Rica-Nicaragua and also more broadly on a global scale.

Statement of the Problem

In October of 2010, a border dispute that lasted over five years broke out between the countries of Costa Rica and Nicaragua. At the center of the controversy was a man by the name of Edén Pastora Gomez and a small 1.25-square-mile patch of swampland known as Isla
Portillos or Isla Calero,¹ located along the two countries’ shared eastern border. The dispute began when Pastora, a former Sandinista guerilla leader, also known as Comandante Cero, initiated a river dredging project on the San Juan River and subsequently marched his troops across the border and planted a Nicaraguan flag in Costa Rican territory. Learning of the “invasion” and breach of national sovereignty, Laura Chinchilla (then president of Costa Rica) and Costa Rican Security Minister José María Tijerino ordered 150 police officers to the border to “assure the safety of Costa Rican citizens” (The Tico Times 2011). The following day, Pastora sent military reinforcements to the zone “to combat drug trafficking” and the situation began to escalate at a rapid pace.

In the early part of November 2010, in an attempt to resolve the issue, the disagreement was brought before the Organization of American States (OAS). As a result, OAS Secretary General José Miguel Insulza visited San Jose, Costa Rica, and Managua, Nicaragua, then conducted a fly-over inspection of the disputed territory. Afterward, the OAS ordered Nicaragua to remove its troops from the area. Nicaragua, however, denied this request, responding that the OAS is not the correct authoritative body to rule on this matter and the Sandinista troops remained in the region.

Due to alleged environmental damages associated with Pastora’s river-dredging project (i.e., tilling of trees and depositing sediment on the riverbanks), Costa Rica subsequently condemned Nicaragua for violating stipulations of the RAMSAR Convention, an international organization protecting wetlands of importance. In an equally symbolic move, Costa Rica then

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¹ The disputed territory is referenced colloquially and often in the media as Isla Calero; however, the exact location of the conflict only forms a part of Isla Calero and can be correctly identified on maps by either the name Isla Portillos or Harbour Head Island.
issued an arrest warrant for Edén Pastora through the Costa Rican Prosecutor’s Office based on these same allegations of environmental damage. Pastora denied the conclusions of the RAMSAR Convention that identified environmental damages.

Tensions continued to rise, politically and on the ground, in the form of increased policing and military activities throughout the month of November. Having no army, Costa Rica resorted to the national police force and international organizations. On November 18, 2011, the Costa Rican government filed a claim at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) at The Hague. Up until the ICJ announced a ruling in December of 2015, allocations of blame and insults ensued from both sides.

Nicaragua issued a white paper entitled “Las Verdades Que Costa Rica Oculta” or “The Truths That Costa Rica Hides.” It is a brazen account defending Nicaragua’s position on the border line, the country’s rights to the Rio San Juan, and counter-claims of environmental damage. The Costa Rican Ministry of Foreign Relations and Worship retaliated with its own publication, “The Truth About the Invasion, Occupation, Use and Damage of Costa Rican Territory on Behalf of Nicaragua,” that also claimed to be the legitimate account of the border events. To further underscore Costa Rica’s position, in February of 2011, President Laura Chinchilla appealed to the international community in an op-ed in the Miami Herald entitled “Nicaragua’s Invasion of Costa Rica.”
In March of 2011, after months of heightened political tensions and massive exposure in the Costa Rican and Nicaraguan media, the ICJ ordered both countries to refrain from stationing military and police personnel in the disputed area. Nicaragua continued to have military personnel along the river and at times in the disputed territory. Pastora also carried on with the dredging project.

After the Nicaraguan national elections in November of 2011, the conflict took on a different tone. After Ortega’s victory, the political atmosphere and relations between the two countries were slightly less contentious and of a lesser intensity, especially in the public realm. As the case sluggishly made its way through the bureaucratic ICJ system over the next four years, there was less media coverage and tensions decreased between the two nations. However, during these four years (roughly 2011-2014), Costa Rica continued to heavily increase its
police presence in the border region. Nicaragua also maintained Sandinista troops in the area. Ultimately, on December 16th, 2015 the ICJ ruled in favor of Costa Rica, confirming Costa Rican sovereignty over the territory. It was ruled that Nicaragua was to pay Costa Rica for damages; however, Nicaragua has yet to pay the $6.7 million settlement to Costa Rica.

Research Questions

Having provided a description of the context of this research, I now define the main research questions of this study. Driven by a focus on the macro-level politics and micro-level social reality of the border conflict, the primary research questions of this study are:

1. What types of nationalistic narratives of conflict did political leaders and decision-makers put forth to justify their actions during the 2010-2015 Costa Rica-Nicaragua border dispute?
2. What types of changes took place in the community of Delta, Costa Rica as a result of the conflict and these narratives?
3. How did the people residing in this community experience and make sense of these changes?

To answer this third question, a series of sub-questions was addressed. These include:

3a. What are the defining characteristics of the social groupings that comprise the population in Delta, Costa Rica?
3b. How do these social groups interact and/or not interact? What forms do these social interactions take and under what circumstances?

Methodology

In order to accomplish these research objectives, I spent a total of 18 months conducting ethnographic research in the Costa Rica-Nicaragua border region between 2011 and 2015. I
carried out a three-month preliminary study during the summer of 2011 in the town of Barra del Colorado Sur, Costa Rica. Later, a consecutive fifteen-month stay in the border village of Delta, Costa Rica from 2014-2015 provided the greatest amount of data informing this study. Additional research in the form of interviews and archival work was carried out in the cities of San Carlos and San Jose, Costa Rica, as well as in the small border town of San Juan de Nicaragua, formerly known as San Juan del Norte or Greytown.

**Entering the Field**

I learned about the village of Delta, Costa Rica by happenstance. In 2011, during the course of my preliminary study in Barra del Colorado, I came to know the chief of police. After sharing with him the goal of my study, he allowed for me to accompany the *Fuerza Publica* (National Police) officers on a surveillance patrol along the border in order to familiarize myself with the parts of the region only accessible by foot. That 19-kilometer excursion culminated at the police post in Delta. At the time, I had no idea that Delta existed. The tiny outpost did not appear on maps I had studied and at the time was only accessible by boat via the San Juan or Colorado Rivers. The police post at Delta was a tiny structure and there were only a few other buildings. One such building was an abandoned house being used by the police as a kitchen and mess hall, where I was invited to eat a bland lunch with the police officers. I then took a stroll around to examine the surroundings and the police post that comprised the village. I conducted several short interviews with residents of Delta, Costa Rica on that day.

One such interview took place at a small general store, or *pulperia*, situated at the center of the village. As I stood at the open window making small talk with a young girl who was tending the shop, I could see through to the back of the building where a busy open-air kitchen was located. Everyone who came and went walked directly past me and past the service window
to the back door of the kitchen to handle their business. There they spoke, drank coffee, smoked cigarettes, shared food, and purchased goods. I knew immediately that Delta was the ethnographic vantage point I desired to understand how the border, the conflict, and the people of the community converged. At that time, however, my initial topic of inquiry (police-civilian relations) kept me located in Barra del Colorado for the remainder of my preliminary work. On the very last day of my field work in 2011, I learned that the regional police headquarters was being moved from Barra del Colorado to Delta. This included all of the police (except for two who would remain at the post in Barra) and all of their resources. The overlap of the police, the border, the conflict, and my interest in what this meant for the people living there contributed to my decision to return to Delta for further ethnographic study in 2014.

In 2014 when I returned to Costa Rica, I learned that a road had been constructed to reach Delta. It was supposedly passable during the dry season, but no one seemed to know where one could pick up the road in the heartland to make a way to the border. To learn more about the land route and potential housing arrangements, I returned to Barra by boat and enlisted the help of my former key informant who had knowledge about and contact information of residents in Delta. After a few phone calls, she secured room and board for me at an affordable rate. I returned to Puerto Limon to gather my belongings and hire a research assistant who could help me find the border road and, ultimately, the land route to Delta. After several weeks of preparation and organizing, I rented a 4x4 vehicle and we made the 7-hour journey from Puerto Limon to the border.

I was ill-prepared for life in Delta. I had departed from Manhattan and arrived at a border outpost with limited electricity, no potable water, and endless amounts of insects, mosquitos,
poisonous snakes, and wild animals. Aside from my research assistant, I knew no one. My Spanish was rusty and I was completely out of my element. I relied on my faith in the goodwill of humanity to reassure myself that things would (at least) not turn out terribly. In retrospect, it was a wise decision to trust my gut. Putting myself in that position of near complete unfamiliarity and unknowingness, a place of genuine naivety, opened my eyes to things and people I would have never met or learned elsewhere. I grew to love life in Delta because of the people there. If it were not for them and all that they taught me, I honestly question whether I would have lasted fifteen months in the field!

**Establishing Rapport**

During my preliminary research in Barra del Colorado in 2011, I experienced several intense encounters with the Costa Rican National Police and National Security who very adamantly questioned my identity and purpose in the border region. On one particular occasion, I was videotaped and questioned by Costa Rican National Security at the border upon returning to the country from Nicaragua. My landlord at the time also informed me that while I was gone, the police asked her to unlock my door so they could search my living quarters. On a separate occasion, I was approached in front of my home by several officers and instructed to get out multiple forms of identification to explain/prove who I am. I later learned that phone calls were made by the US Embassy to my mother and home university regarding my safety and identity. Near the end of my preliminary study, my amicable relationship with the local police chief drew ice cold. I had made many mistakes in establishing rapport and my identity as a researcher, even though I was honest with residents and police about my identity and purpose. The reality, now very clear in hindsight, was that I was in the midst of a conflict zone where political tensions
were high, and I was always suspiciously hanging around, watching, writing, and asking questions. In that regard, the three months of preliminary research in 2011 were a great learning experience in how to enter the field. The most important lesson I learned was the value and need to prioritize the length of time necessary to establish rapport and trust. This became a crucial focus in my 2014 return to the field, as I learned that establishing rapport was an absolutely necessary step to carry out anthropological research successfully, especially in a conflict zone.

I also realized at that time how important it would be to present a clear purpose and role regarding my presence when I returned to the field. I introduced myself to the police with my documentation from the start and explained my research intentions. However, in a place saturated with law enforcement, on a border, and where security personnel were always trying to pump information out of locals, I chose not to prioritize a relationship with the police as I knew this would be detrimental to establishing relationships with community members.

One approach I used was to teach English at the local school. Not only was this a way to give back to the community, but people also associated me with the school and education, not the police or the C.I.A. (although these accusations still occasionally occurred). Initially, I taught the school-aged children for roughly an hour every weekday. At the request of village leaders, I held an adult English language course in the evenings on Tuesdays and Thursdays. As a result of these courses, community members (including the police, some of whom were my students) came to know me as *profe* or *maestra.* Through this endeavor, I also became familiar with my students, their families, and the local gossip. Over time, I eventually was able to put faces to names (and nicknames) and I could follow conversations as stories and events unfolded. I also was able to associate people based on kinship, labor relations, and where they lived. This was especially the case with the school-aged children with whom I became very close.
The English classes that I conducted also helped me to learn the local dialect of Spanish which is heavily blended with the Nicaraguan variety, consisting of different vocabulary, grammar, and intonation. The task of teaching English took away from my ability to conduct fieldwork at any given moment and it required a lot of preparation and assessment, but it served as a genuine and valid form of social interaction. This was important not just for establishing my role within the community, but the classroom also turned out to be an important vantage point from which to observe social interactions. Due to the geographical arrangement of the village, in which homesteads are spaced out on large farms, there is a lack of communal public space within the village to observe non-intrusively. This characteristic of my field site proved to be one of the most challenging factors to observation. Oftentimes, long stretches of time would pass between seeing one’s neighbors or particular community members, unless sought out. Family life was confined to the homestead and was thus very private. Therefore, the observation of daily domestic activities or the act of conducting an interview was a deliberate action that often required coordination, an invitation, or tagging along with someone paying a house visit for a specific purpose.

For these reasons, the evening English classes became all the more valuable for understanding village life. The class created a public space and opportunity for interaction that otherwise would not have existed. The school’s evening English class became a place for gathering, socializing, and other forms social interaction. Under the only street light in the village, in front of the school, I witnessed flirtations, amusements, and fist fights. The school was a key location for me to place myself as an observer, but more significantly, it provided me with a natural role in the community that somewhat normalized my presence.
Cautious of others’ perceptions, I purposefully attempted to avoid association with the police. As an outsider (like the police who too are not local), I knew I had to keep a distance. I left all police interviewing until the very end of my research project and my many encounters with the police were informal. I did interact with them quite frequently, but so did many locals and I attempted to follow their habits. I was mindful not to present myself to the community with them in any formal way. I also never solicited information from residents in the presence of the police. In addition to this, I was never invited by the police on expeditions during this stay nor did I seek out these opportunities. As enlightening as it was to accompany police on boat rides and border surveillance missions as I did in 2011, it was damaging to building community relations. Those tours were necessary because they took me to places I never could have gone to alone nor would have even known existed, but the negative consequences simply outweighed the positive.

Thus, I spent a lot of time at the school and with the schoolteacher Luis who lived nearby to me and who became a good friend. I observed and wrote field notes on a daily basis for months without conducting any formal interviews. This was deliberate. I chose two local key informants (one female, one male) who were community leaders and extremely knowledgeable about the people, politics, and life in Delta. They were both Costa Rican landowners. I asked them my questions privately and recorded what I learned. I spent months employing this strategy, systematically recording observations, how things functioned in Delta, and a large variety of local knowledge ranging from history, dialect, stories, and the like. This provided me with a solid groundwork of information from which to work. I kept a close distance to my key informants, who took turns accompanying me nearly everywhere I went. Without their presence
and help, this fieldwork would not have been possible. They (and their good faith and reputations) were the reason I was able to visit people’s private residences en confianza. They vouched for me being buena gente behind my back when people undoubtedly asked, “Quien es esa gringa?” or “Who is this gringa?”

I did not conduct formal interviews until over six months into my study, a point at which I felt comfortable with the relationships I had made. At that point I believed that my reputation superseded suspicions people may have had about me or people quite frankly stopped caring about my presence. They saw me at the school, playing cards or coloring with their kids, working alongside the Red Cross, and doing daily tasks like washing my clothes or hanging out in the general store. Nonetheless, there were still a reluctant few who wanted nothing to do with me. This went primarily unspoken. I saw it in their facial gestures and body language when I visited their farms. This behavior came from families rumored to be involved in drug trafficking and they wanted nothing to do with me, even though I had great relationships with their children who were my students. One family, who resided at the outskirts of the village, were the immediate relatives of a convicted drug trafficker currently serving prison time in a jail in Costa Rica. On one occasion, these sentiments were vocally expressed. At a community gathering, while in a drunken stupor, a Nicaraguan farm worker associated with that family looked me directly in the eyes and repeatedly and aggressively accused me of being a cop. I respectfully told him he was wrong, but I also knew to choose my battles wisely. Recounting the experience to my key informants the next day, they shrugged it off, calling him a drunkard who was stuck in the era of the Contra War and saying to pay him no mind. I followed their advice and steered clear of him. This example was an exception to the norm of how most residents of Delta treated
me, including other members of this family. Overall, I was received very warmly, in an inviting fashion and with respect by the large majority of the community.

**Data Collection Techniques**

During my time in Delta, I used several different techniques to observe and collect data. The primary technique that I used, on a daily basis, was participant observation. This involved spending as much time as possible with different people from the community and learning by observing and simply ‘hanging out.’ I participated heavily in school activities such as teaching, curriculum development, activities such as a recycling initiative, projects, social events, and parties. I attended community meetings held by the local Development Association, school board, and parent-teacher conferences. Any time that health clinics, deliveries, tourists, NGOs, reporters, municipal workers, university groups, or even a random North American subcontractor came to Delta, I made sure I was there listening, observing, taking notes, and often recording. With local residents, I went fishing, made cheese, herded animals, made house calls, (tried) to play soccer, drank bottles of *cacique*, protested in the nation’s capital, went to a funeral, appeared at birthday and holiday parties, navigated the river, cooked traditional food, endured the rainy season floods and dry season draughts, exercised with cops, and lived life day-in and day-out with the men, women, and children who call Delta home. There were days and sometimes weeks that relentlessly dragged on, seemingly uneventful at the time. Other times, however, it was those late-night talks over coffee, routine fishing outings, and other monotonous tasks that, reflecting back, were the most informative.

In addition to participant observation, I conducted formal and informal interviews. A total of 64 formal interviews were conducted. Each of these 64 interviews was audio-recorded and
later coded and transcribed. I interviewed people who lived in and around Delta, as well as individuals located in Nicaragua, and San Jose and San Carlos, Costa Rica. Interviews were conducted with police officers and chiefs, landowners, migrant farmhands, the local school teacher, domestic workers, elected local officials, self-professed narcotics traffickers, tour guides, former Contras fighters, and national figures such as a former and sitting president, military leaders, and Costa Rican deputies and ministers.

Together with members of La Cruz Roja or the International Committee of the Red Cross, located regionally out of Puerto Viejo de Sarapiqui, I conducted a house-by-house census that provided the basis for determining the nationality of household heads and other details such as the gender, literacy, and number of family members residing in the home. I collected school attendance records, community reports prepared by doctors, flyers and announcements posted to the public, letters and documents from the school board and Development Association, and community charity lists.

I was able to use all of these data-gathering techniques to inform my “big-picture” understanding of the social environment before focusing directly on the factors relevant to my research questions. This should not be confused with an attempt to “study everything”; instead, this was purposeful to gain a solid understanding of the many interrelated factors at play. As Arensberg (1954) explained, “the nature of exploration in vivo is just that one does not prejudice the discovery of relevant factors by premature isolation of particular causes. The job is to establish the priorities of relevance” (112).

I recorded detailed systematic field notes based on my daily observations and interviews. Throughout the day, I took notes on things I observed, learned, participated in, and discussed. I
jotted my notes down on my cell phone and did my daily field note write-ups at night in bed on my phone. Originally, this was not my plan. Rather, this strategy was a practical adaptation to life in the jungle. At night, a computer screen or desk lamp for writing attracted more insects than was tolerable. In bed, I had the protection of a mosquito net and the convenience of backing up my notes instantaneously and automatically to a cloud over the 3G network. Extracting them into a Word document was ultimately a challenge, but it was feasible.

I chose to take the risks involved in keeping my notes on my phone because it was easier than constantly taking out a notebook. It also did not seem to incite the same sense of alarm from those being observed. Internet was new in Delta and everyone always had a phone in hand. Most people probably assumed I was texting or on the internet. For me in this situation, this technique simply was the most commonsensical. People were naturally more accustomed to seeing a phone in hand than a notebook. This formed a major part of my prioritized effort to build trust and not raise concerns.

**On Community**

One can utilize many different approaches when investigating the socio-cultural dynamics of life in a border community. In this particular case, following distinctions outlined by Arensberg (1961:250), I defined community as a “structured social field of individual relationships unfolding through time.” The notion of community as utilized in this study is community as sample or unit of observation, as opposed to an object or thing. Community as a field of observation or sample recognizes the temporal and repetitive form as an “enduring natural unit of both process and organization in living phenomenon” (1961:250).
The purpose, as Arensberg (1954) explained, is to “use the community as a setting for the exploration, discovery, or verification of interconnections” (110) through the use of various techniques in order to produce a working model for comparison. In this particular study, it is utilized to examine social relations among three distinct social groupings in the border community.

The community of Delta, serving as the setting of this study, is a rare case and example of a community that, due to its location and population size, is easy to define from a geographical perspective. Initially, for me as an outsider, this was not evident, but my approach was to adopt the local definition of community parameters as described by the people living and working there. To define the geographical limits of the community, I asked community leaders, emergency response personnel, police, landowners, farm workers, and other residents open-ended and broad questions to uncover their perception of where “Delta” lies. The answers, which sometimes referenced different vantage points (such as a bridge or stream or someone’s property line) ultimately depicted a geographic space with very little variation.

I had several informants draw maps illustrating the community. The results (one example pictured below) was an impressive visual diagram drawn completely from memory depicting the local geography, property lines, international borderlines, names and nationality of property owners, and locations of landmarks such as schools, the police post, waterways, and neighboring communities.
Figure 2: An informant’s hand-drawn map, produced from memory, of the community of Delta, Costa Rica

Existing maps of this portion of the border do not portray the village of Delta. In the few examples that do identify the village, it is simply a tiny black dot on the Costa Rican side of the border where the Colorado River branches off of the San Juan River. To my knowledge, there is no complete community map of Delta that could be used as a geographical reference for the purposes of defining the parameters of the village. Delta is simply the cluster of houses and families (and now police) that reside in and around the point marking the start of the Colorado River on the Costa Rican side of the international border line. From the center vantage point of the police post and general store, it extends west to the property of Augustin Reyes; south to the
waterway known as Cano Bravo; east to the river-facing homes on Isla Calero; and north to the international boundary line with Nicaragua.

The justification for why I studied this particular border community rests in the socio-political context of the time and place, in the midst of an international border dispute that drew an unprecedented number of national police and security forces into the village. Almost overnight, the community became ground zero in Costa Rica’s fight for “sovereignty” against what came to be the country’s greatest “threat” to national security, Nicaragua. This situation and its relevance, combined with the described geographic characteristics and small population (roughly 50 families\(^2\)), provided an excellent opportunity for a single researcher to answer the outlined research questions.

The isolated nature of this locale lends itself nicely to anthropological research. However, the critique of treating “[the community] as if it were a self-contained structural and functional whole which could be understood in terms of itself alone” (Steward 1950, 22) must be addressed. Arensberg (1954), recounting Steward’s (1950) criticism, pointed out that “Though many authors have recognized in theory that their studies need to be related to a larger universe of social, cultural, and psychological phenomena, few studies have attempted to show how the larger society affects the community under investigation” (119).

My work specifically addressed this concern by directly investigating how the words and actions of political and military leaders existing outside of the community affected Delta, Costa Rica. From a methodological perspective, venturing out of the community to conduct archival research\(^3\) and to meet with and interview influential political leaders during this conflict was one

\(^2\) At the time of the census, a total of 41 households were counted, which was the most conservative count measured throughout the duration of the research.

\(^3\) Archival research was carried out at the University of Costa Rica in San Pedro, San Jose, the Biblioteca Nacional Miguel Obregón Lizano, and the Instituto Geográfico Nacional.
way that I attempted to bridge this gap. I also documented the different infrastructural and border security changes as observed and reported in Delta between 2011 and 2015. Since prior to the conflict, the community (and the surrounding border area) has existed for decades beyond the scope of state interest and influence, it is easy to track the drastic changes that came about as a result of the conflict. I took trips outside the community to conduct interviews and to gain insight into the rhetoric and reasoning political leaders used to justify development projects and other local changes. The documented changes were not subtle. They were drastic, swift, and at times very expensive adaptations that were purposefully and overtly nationalistic in character.

Some examples included the installation of a massive and blatant Costa Rican national flag, plaques at the school engraved with the name of former president Laura Chinchilla, and proud roadside kilometer markers along the controversial new border road.4 Other examples included the creation of a multimillion-dollar border road and the reestablishment of the Border Police unit within the Costa Rican National Police Force. Methodologically speaking, by collecting in-depth ethnographic data at the local level, coupled with firsthand interviews of the main political players of the conflict, one can begin to make the connections Steward (1950) and other critics emphasized. To further facilitate this connection between the larger society and the community under investigation, Arensberg (1954) reminded us that “we must also have a theory of structure accounting both for the (if only partially) isolable community itself and for the larger sociocultural system” (122). For this, I turn to the anthropological literature on borders.

**Anthropology of Frontiers/Borderlands**

The demarcation of boundaries between social groups and units has been a topic central to the discipline of cultural anthropology since its inception. Analyzing the variance of “group

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4 The changes that occurred in Delta are discussed at length in Chapter 2.
definitions of belonging” (De Vos 1975:5) and how human beings develop kinship systems, forms of stratification and intergroup relations is fundamental to understanding human society and culture. One subject of social organization that strongly influenced current literature in anthropological borderland studies was that of ethnic group relations, brought about primarily through the work of Fredrik Barth (1969).

His work marked a different approach to the significance of group boundaries, particularly as they pertain to symbolic constructions of social and cultural characteristics as they exist between units. Barth’s seminal work, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* (1969), shifted the focus from different groups’ cultural content or cultural characteristics to an emphasis on identity formation based on boundaries and how these boundaries are comprised and maintained. His contribution led to a new treatment of borders, symbolically and figuratively within anthropology. Barth’s understanding of borders was not focused on the content that they partition off, but how borders themselves become the basis of social interactions.

Writing on the implications of Barth’s work, Eriksen (2015) explains that “the key concept was boundaries, not understood in terms of cultural boundaries, but as social ones. On both sides, groups maintain stereotypes about each other. This is not about objective cultural differences, but perceptions of cultural differences which are socially significant” (2015:103). Barth thus influenced later research on ethnic and group relations as they relate to collective identity formation. It is then “contact, not isolation, that leads to ethnicity, and it is whatever is socially effective, not actual cultural difference, that contributes to the importance of ethnicity” (Eriksen 2015:104).

Building on Barth’s influential ideas on social boundaries and other interdisciplinary border works (Stoddard 1982), Alvarez sets out to summarize the anthropological endeavor on
borderlands discussing the canonical concepts that form the theoretical underpinnings of an anthropology of borderlands in the *Annual Review of Anthropology (1995)*. He very pointedly suggests “culture, community and identity” (1995:449) as some the most salient concepts in this body of literature; notions all of which are heavily explored in this work. He also asserts that the concepts of conflict, contradiction and paradox are paramount to border studies, as Wisserian notions of culture-area studies has for too long misled the genre. For Alvarez, “borders and borderlands graphically illustrate the conflicts and contradiction in a hierarchically organized world. For it is here that cultures, ideologies, and individuals clash and challenge our disciplinary perspectives on social harmony and equilibrium” (1995:449).

In part, Alvarez attributes the conflict, to the postcolonial project of nation-state creation, dividing “social forms, people and regions” (1995:448). He reminds us that border histories are more than context and of the import to examine the role borders play in the bonds and social networks that people create over time (1995). For this reason, Chapter 3 of this work emphasizes the different historical treaties and events of both the colonial era and more modern contexts, particularly the border happenings during the Nicaraguan Revolution and Contras War. The history of this border region is itself a story of Alvarez’s emphasized role of conflict and tension. From the early conquests along the San Juan River or internationally-arbitrated boundary disputes to the contemporary border conflict from 2010-2015, the Nicaragua-Costa Rica border is characterized by conflict, turmoil and perpetual tension. At times throughout history this characteristic wanes, but nonetheless it is drawn upon by leaders, typically in moments of nationalistic fervor, to activate notions of national identity and to accomplish political goals.

These moments of conflict manifest, influence and inform life in the borderlands, a term Alvarez defines as “a region and set of practices,” determined by a geopolitical border, that is
“characterized by conflict and contradiction, material and ideational” (1995:448). I find this articulation particularly useful as it intertwines space, human behavior, and history. It is in border spaces that paradox of inequalities, of power and political systems clash together and “reaches into the most local of contexts and affects the everyday life of border folk” (1995: 451).

With this in mind, it is important to distinguish between works that treat borders as literal objects and processes while others take a more conceptual approach. Alvarez notes this distinction in his work, but it is Green (2013) who identifies a different treatment of borders stemming from the European context. “Whereas the US-Mexican borderland studies focused particularly on migration and other forms of crossing the border, Donnan & Wilson (1994) led the field in studying issues such as nationalism and other elements of state involvement in the establishment of identities” (2013:348). Their focus on physical borders brings to light the role of nation and state, recognizing that borderlands are a useful and relevant domain to observe daily experiences of state-making and nationalism as they exist in constant negotiation. Donnan & Wilson maintain that “An anthropological approach to frontiers attempts to construct notions of ‘nation’ and ‘state’ from the bottom up, in political, administrative, and social senses, and from the outside in, that is, from the limits of a state back to its centre” (Donnan and Wilson 1994:11). It is in this sense, then that the border, as object and process, is negotiated and legitimized. It is this dyadic relationship between state actors and policies at the core and border peoples of the periphery that truly constructs the border. One example of this, discussed further in Chapter 3 is the theme found in interviews with political leaders of wanting to incorporate their frontier territories because the people there don’t identify with the nation or possess “nationalistic-enough” characteristics, such as particular language dialects or pride expressed in
the flying of national flags. Another example in this work where this dynamic is especially visible is the role of Niaraguan farm laborers whom as “migrants are engaged in a global capitalism that at one level obliterates the border distinction but that, at another level, is a mechanism of border control through the hegemonic state apparatus” (Alvarez 1995:458). For this reason, this dissertation pays attention to the national level actors, narratives and initiatives that inform life of local residents, border patrol officers and migrants in Delta, Costa Rica.

Therefore, this dissertation follows the anthropology of frontiers informed by the US-Mexico border tradition but also the more recent works that are concerned with physical boundaries, the state and how all of these elements coalesce. This approach takes a much more direct aim at real issues in borderlands informed by the experiences of people residing, working or passing through these zones. To fully understand the drastic changes that have taken place in Delta, Costa Rica it is important to place them within a larger context, namely that of the international border dispute and the wave of reactionary nationalistic efforts of a police state defined by massive development projects. A successful or complete process of nation and state building may seem to be, in retrospect, a matter of top-down decision making, but in most cases, both historically and in the contemporary world, they are a matter of the dialectics between ‘bottom’ and ‘top’, as well as among diverse groups ‘at the bottom’” (Donnan and Wilson 1994:2). As this work will show, the state and borderland residents engage in a distinct and symbolic dialectic that is most visible in police-civilian relations and the local attitudes residents assert in response to state interventions such as the large-scale development projects outlined in

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5 Discussed at length in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 are references made by national leaders to the dialect spoken by different groups in the border region and how this linguistic identity reflects on their national identity. In addition to this, flags were passed out by the Costa Rican police to homesteads in Costa Rican territory directly facing the San Juan River. Furthermore, Nicaragua requires that all vessels navigating the Nicaraguan waters of the Rio San Juan display a Nicaraguan flag.
Chapter 2. Donnan and Wilson recognize that “border cultures are examples of the dialectical relations which exist between myriad social groups, and between them and larger and more powerful levels of socio-political integration, including the state” (1994:10).

A look at the ways in which these diverse local-level groups interact speaks to the ability (or lack thereof) of the Costa Rican state to carry out security and surveillance measures, development projects, further narratives of national identity and ultimately to integrate a peripheral and marginalized population into the national fold. As the following chapters depict in nuanced portrayals of social relations, this approach allows one to capture the “‘big picture’ of nationalism and the state at the borders” (Donnan and Wilson 1994:4).

In this work, these ‘big pictures’ are explored in actions and interviews of national-level actors such as presidents and military leaders but also in the day-to-day interactions of border patrol agents, who acting as agents of the state, engage with community members and migrants on a daily basis. For example, the ways in which a border police officer discerns illegality and defines who belongs to the community is explained (in his own words) based on nationalistic stereotypes of self/other, and the role of individuals in the local workforce. Local understandings of (il)legality, particularly in regard to migrants, clearly illustrates how borders are places of continual cultural negotiation and interpretation. “Simply put, the socio-political movements which are at a nation’s core depend on collectivities of local communities for their support and their successful achievement of their aims” (Donnan and Wilson 1994:2). The local reactions and contestations to these nationalistic stereotypes and government plans interestingly depict how residents of border communities construct their own definitions of ethnicity, nationality, language and even (il)legality. This research aims to utilize ethnographic examples in the form of social relations and local events to depict how these processes and identities take place among
different groups in Delta, Costa Rica. In the following chapters, I build my argument that national efforts of any type, whether security initiatives, development projects or social programs, must prioritize the incorporation of local realities and understandings of the state in order to be successful. The narratives of conflict presented here within by national leaders, juxtaposed with the local social reality, reveal the disconnect between state and local actors that contributes to failed policies, fiscal waste, and potential further marginalization of border residents, including migrants, in Delta, Costa Rica. Understanding this dialectic between state and local is crucial. There are real world implications such as the effectiveness of state spending, allocation of government resources and manpower both in the form of security and labor into a region where notions of nationality, community, and illegality take on a different meaning. It is this unique characteristic of paradox, contestation and conflict that defines the anthropological literature on borderlands. As Alvarez notes, “an anthropology of frontiers must incorporate the analysis of the inheritance, negotiation, and invention of cultural boundaries between and among groups of people” (1994:12).
II. THE NATIONAL CONTEXT

As previously mentioned in the Introduction, this work utilized a top-down and bottom-up approach in order to facilitate a holistic understanding of the border dispute and how it unfolded within the community of Delta, Costa Rica. With that in mind, this section consists of two chapters that are primarily focused on describing the conflict from the perspective of the state, from both a developmental and political orientation. These two chapters provide a comprehensive examination of the political context that factored heavily into the course of the dispute. While these factors existed outside of the community of study, on an (inter)national level, they were directly related and had drastic influence on the local context and population.

The goal of Chapter 2 is to identify and describe the changes that took place in Delta after the start of the border conflict. The information presented is based on differences I recorded between visits in 2011 through 2015, news reports on the region, interviews with politicians, accounts of local residents, and my own observations while in the field. Particular attention is paid to the political atmosphere and rationale that gave rise to local changes. Also presented are the community members’ nuanced experiences and perspectives of how these different developments affected life in their village. Chapter 2 also includes firsthand accounts from political leaders regarding the development projects and security initiatives on the ground.

The objective of Chapter 3 is to focus on political narratives created by leaders in power at the time of this study. By drawing upon these first-hand interviews of political and military leaders responsible for crafting and managing the border dispute, I mapped out the political atmosphere and different ideologies, narratives and explanations used to justify their actions in the community of Delta. Accounts by former-president Laura Chinchilla (who was in office at the start of the conflict and responsible for overseeing the initial security response) are included
in Chapter 2. Remarks from Edén Pastora Gomez (the Nicaraguan guerilla leader who, in his role as Minister of Development of the Rio San Juan Basin, carried out the tactical stages and propaganda of the conflict) and Costa Rican president Luis Guillermo Solís (2014-2018) are analyzed at length in Chapter 3. These narratives are of great import as they were responsible for generating the abrupt and massive changes in the form of development projects and security build-up in the local setting.

It must be emphasized that the rapid transformations that occurred in Delta and the Rio San Juan basin did not come from within the border region nor from within the community. They were not grassroots changes spearheaded by local actors. Not only did the scale of these border projects evidence this fact (the residents simply did not have the resources to finance or carry out these projects), but the timing, sense of urgency, national rhetoric, and resulting failures described below emphasize the miscalculations of the state in the border region, particularly in Delta, during the conflict. The following development projects and initiatives clearly exhibit the disconnect that exists between the state and the social reality of the frontier zone.
CHAPTER 2: CONFLICT-DRIVEN CHANGE

The small border village of Delta, Costa Rica serves as the entry point for nearly everyone heading further inland to Isla Calero. Located, literally, at the end of the border road (also known as la trocha), the small village provides the last stop for basic supplies as well as the regional communication hub for coordinating boat transportation or overnight accommodations in the region. The border road leading to Delta is also the only road in or out of the region. The final 15-kilometer stretch runs parallel, uninterrupted along the Rio San Juan (and thus Nicaraguan border).

![Map of the conflicted territory and border region.](image_url)

**Figure 3.** Map of the conflicted territory and border region.

The territory marked in yellow depicts the land disputed between Nicaragua and Costa Rica. The island lies between the San Juan River (to the north and west), the Colorado River of Costa Rica (to the south and southeast), and the Caribbean Sea (to the east and northeast). The area of the island is roughly 151.6 km² (58.5 sq mi). The northernmost tip of the island, separated by a small canal, is another island of the river delta known as Isla Portillos. The disputed area is known as Punta Castillo (by Costa Rica) or Harbor Head (by Nicaragua). The entire river delta region beyond the border outpost of Delta, Costa Rica, is colloquially referred to as Isla Calero.

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1 Isla Calero is Costa Rica’s largest island located in the far northeast corner of the country. The island lies between the San Juan River (to the north and west), the Colorado River of Costa Rica (to the south and southeast), and the Caribbean Sea (to the east and northeast). The area of the island is roughly 151.6 km² (58.5 sq mi). The northernmost tip of the island, separated by a small canal, is another island of the river delta known as Isla Portillos. The disputed area is known as Punta Castillo (by Costa Rica) or Harbor Head (by Nicaragua). The entire river delta region beyond the border outpost of Delta, Costa Rica, is colloquially referred to as Isla Calero.
After hours of bumping and winding through dense jungle and often impassable roads, one arrives at the rustic outpost of Delta, Costa Rica. The sight from the banks of the river is impressive. The village overlooks the parting of the Rio San Juan, a gaping expanse of chocolate-hued water that gives way to the Colorado River in melody with pristine wildlife and nature. A massive Costa Rican national flag dramatically bellows high above the jungle canopy. A single cable of electricity provides a minimal amount of energy to the few structures in Delta, such as the small general store where one can purchase basic necessities. Offering the few public services that are available, the border outpost of Delta also serves as the center of the community for those who live in the surrounding region. It is here, in Delta, where individuals and families who live dispersed throughout large tracts of farmland come together to purchase goods, exchange information, catch the bus to the nearest city, or attend school.

The village is also home to the border police post, where most convoys of Costa Rican security forces converge before embarking on surveillance or patrol missions to Isla Calero. Since the onset of the conflict in 2010, the ramshackle wooden police hut that was once home to two officers has been transformed into a major security installation. Delta is now home to a border police base and living quarters which houses up to 25 border agents (and is capable of more) in two tractor-trailer containers that function as dormitories. A helicopter pad, multiple all-terrain vehicles, security cameras, a lightning-fast telecommunications tower, and over $1.25 million US dollars in river patrol boats were also invested in the development of the border post.² Throughout the duration of the conflict, security personnel ranging from rank-and-file police officers, border patrol agents, members of Costa Rican National Security, national park rangers,

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² At the time of this study, MINAET (the Costa Rican Ministry of Environment, Energy and Telecommunications) was constructing an operational post to patrol matters of environmental concern in the region. This post, still under construction when I left, is planned to house additional armed security personnel.
US border patrol agents, US government contractors, even the current and former president of the Republic made their way through the community of Delta, Costa Rica. In addition, there was the occasional presence of reporters from national media outlets, environmental agencies, NGO personnel, academics, and curiosity-seekers alike.

As a result of the border conflict, the community of Delta, Costa Rica, has witnessed drastic changes over a 5-year period. Due to the village’s proximity and strategic location to the conflicted land, Delta is easily the Costa Rican community most affected by the dispute. Some of the greatest changes have been in the form of large-scale infrastructural developments that have transformed community life. The following examples outline and evaluate these conflict-driven development projects as they pertain to the residents of Delta.

“It Was a War Project”

It is important to shed light on the political context that gave rise to these developments and changes in Delta. The rapid build-up of security infrastructure and personnel is characterized by a marked sense of political urgency, alarm, and confusion. For the first time in decades, primarily since the Contras War of the 1980s, the border dispute of 2010 drew the attention of the Costa Rican government back to Delta. Money, infrastructure, and manpower began to flow in rapidly, changing the dynamics of the community in an unprecedented way. The largest component of the infrastructural development plan that was to occur in Delta was the construction of a controversial border road (discussed in the following section) that aimed to connect Delta with the rest of the country via a land route for the first time in history. The project was initiated under an emergency decree that allowed the work to begin and proceed without an environmental impact survey, raising grave concerns among many.
During the initial months of the border dispute, uncertainty swirled as to whether armed conflict would erupt. There was a distinct sense of urgency within the Costa Rican government that fueled the funneling of resources and security forces directly to the border region. Until mid-2011, Barra del Colorado Sur, a nearby coastal fishing town with an airstrip, was the primary security hub providing access to Isla Calero and the conflict zone. Rotating police groups and supplies were flown in and out on police force aircraft about every eight days, highlighting the need for better access to the region. These costly and ineffective conditions, coupled with the potential threat of Pastora’s troops, gave way to the border road project and the rapid decisions to carry out extensive works in the border region. In particular, Carlos Acosta Monge, one of the lead engineers of the project and former director of the National Highway Council or Consejo Nacional de Vialidad (CONAVI), explained in a 2012 interview with the newspaper La Nación:

*El día antes de salir a vacaciones (2010), me llamaron de Casa Presidencial de urgencia, en la tarde, como a las 5, y Tijerino hace todo su discurso donde nos habla del estado de necesidad y de la invasión inminente, que *los policías nuestros iban a ser masacrados como ratones porque no tenían posibilidad de salir* [énfasis mio].*

*Un proyecto normal de carreteras tiene toda una planificación, un orden lógico y desarrollo técnico que sabemos hacer, pero este no fue un proyecto normal de carreteras, *este fue un proyecto de guerra*, esto es lo que la gente no ha entendido, a nosotros nos lo plantearon como un proyecto de guerra [énfasis mio]. (Murillo Y Vizcaíno 2012).*

The day before we were to leave for break (in 2010), they called me in an urgent fashion from the president’s office in the evening, at about 5:00 pm. And Tijerino\(^3\) gave his speech in which he talked to us about the state of necessity and of the imminent invasion—*our police are going to get massacred like rats because they don’t have a way to get out of there* [my emphasis].

A normal highway project has complete planning, a logical order and technical development, that we know how to do. But this was not a normal highway project, *this was a war project.* This is what the people don’t understand, they proposed it to us as a war project [my emphasis]. (Murillo and Vizcaíno 2012)

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\(^3\) José María Tijerino Pacheco, Minister of Public Safety, Governance and Police under President Laura Chinchilla from May 8, 2010 to April 30, 2011.
As Acosta’s interview demonstrated, the catalyst for infrastructural change in the border region was the threat that Nicaraguan military personnel posed to the nation and the Fuerza Publica of Costa Rica in the disputed border territory. The border road project, which eventually included plans to run electricity and telecommunications into the region, was from the start a security response to a national security threat. Due to the political nature of asserting a national emergency, Acosta explained that normal planning, logic, and technical developments were not utilized. As this was not a normal construction task following typical protocol, this development project, and in particular the border road, was framed on a national level as a necessary war project. This war-time distinction is an especially interesting dynamic because Costa Rica does not have a standing army and therefore cannot technically engage in war. For this reason, the language employed, politically, to justify the development in Delta becomes even more significant and alarming.

In many ways, as work pressed on in the border, it was as if the political elite of San Jose discovered a long-lost part of the country; one in which, to their surprise, there happened to exist people. Occurring in a sort of domino effect, the conflict, which drew attention to the need for a road, then drew attention to the needs of the people in Delta. As then-president Laura Chinchilla remarked:

*The most important part of all of this, what the conflict really taught me, and to many of my team, was that we really realized, and I know it is hard to recognize this, but we really realized the condition that our people was [sic] living in the frontier. For example, the small houses that the Costa Ricans had along the frontier, those houses, most of them had the door looking to Nicaragua. The front door was for Nicaragua and not for Costa Rica...if the back was to Costa Rica it was because we were also giving them our back.*

*With the road, we realized the rest of the needs in terms of water, communications, electricity and the rest of the social needs those communities had. The road really allowed us to know the situation of the population in the frontier of Costa Rica.*
Thus, development came to Delta in the form of an urgent war project. Development came with minimal planning and environmental oversight. It came to serve the needs of the state and the police, who “had no way out” should armed conflict occur. It came from the top, down. The border residents whom they encountered in this peripheral space during the process were an afterthought and not involved in the planning or execution of the projects. Their local knowledge and distinct histories and connections to the border were disregarded. For these reasons, and as portrayed in the following sections, after decades of having little or no relationship with the Costa Rican state, the effort to bring the border residents into the national fold via infrastructural and social development was largely a failure.

A Road With No Bridges

There is no better example of state failure in the frontier region than the border road. The new road and the notion of connecting Delta to the rest of Costa Rica via land was to be monumental and symbolic. Known formally as Ruta 1856 Juan Rafael Mora Porras (but commonly referred to as la trocha), the road was a massive development undertaking by the state with huge potential implications for the community and the region. The project was commissioned by former president Laura Chinchilla, who inaugurated the project with a ribbon-cutting ceremony during a publicized presidential visit to Delta in March of 2012. The scope of the project involved the construction of 155 kilometers of new roadway running parallel to the border from Los Chiles, Costa Rica to Delta, Costa Rica. In the depiction below, the trajectory celebrated that day corresponds to the 23-kilometer stretch outlined in yellow. There were to be access points from multiple locations in the interior of Costa Rica.
A few months after the inauguration, the roadway project erupted into a national corruption scandal involving suspicious allocations of government contracts, embezzlement, and bribery allegations. Several high-ranking officials and engineers were arrested, with investigations eventually leading to the resignation of Francisco Jimenez, who was serving as Minister of Public Works and Transport in 2012 (Soto 2012). Today, the road is still incomplete. Since the funds were illegally swallowed up, large portions of the road are either unfinished, poorly constructed, or impassable. At various points along the road, there are gaping expanses
where there should be bridges. Some segments of the road are traversable under good conditions, such as the final 15-kilometer portion that leads to Delta. However, traveling on the border road in a continuous route or in a fashion consistent with the administration’s plans is impossible.

When asked about the corruption of the border road, former president Chinchilla expressed that in hindsight she would have handled the situation differently. She expressed regret for not providing more oversight into how funds were managed. She acknowledged how problematic the border road project was, at least to her political career. In her opinion, and as she explained, it was not a complete loss. During an interview conducted in her home after she left office, she stressed how the road has generated positive change in border communities. As she described:

*It was impressive, the impact. The problem was, well we had the problems with the corruption with some of the people involved in monitoring the works and so it damages the road in a very amazing way [sic]. The rest of the nation, they think that there is no road at all. That all the money was you know… no—the road is there! The investments were made. Part of the investment was, you know, misused for personal purposes but most of the investment is there. And the impact was very favorable for the population. [37:57]*

Similar to the investments that Chinchilla mentioned, the road is “mostly there.” There are still unfinished sections of the route such as the bridge that was designed to span the Sarapiqui River, connecting Boca Ceiba to Boca Sarapiqui. In other places, poorly constructed bridges and infrastructure were poorly executed and collapsed during the rainy and they remain in disrepair. Even in places that were complete, such as the final 15 kilometers leading to Delta, the road is nearly impassable at certain times of the year.
Figure 5. A mile marker along the incomplete border road near Delta Costa Rica. It reads: “Un trabajo más de este gobierno para su beneficio y el del país” or “Another government work for your benefit and that of the country.”

Figure 6. A collapsed bridge on the newly constructed border road upriver from Delta near Cano Tambor, Costa Rica.
Moreover, the fact that the Delta segment was completed further underscores the central role the community played during the conflict. It also reiterates the extent to which the road was built for the police and official use. Further, Chinchilla’s decision to hold the road’s inauguration ceremony in Delta highlights how Delta symbolized ground zero, or the epicenter, of the conflict. These points are listed here to emphasize the extent to which had the border conflict never taken place, a land route to Delta would have never been built by the state.

Referring back to her statement, Chinchilla is not wrong in saying that some border communities greatly benefitted from the *trocha*. The road now serves as a lifeline to Delta, connecting the village to the nearest city of Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí, roughly four hours away. However, even where the road is complete, in places such as Delta, issues still remain. After the corruption scandal, the road has largely been abandoned, rendering maintenance and repairs a pressing issue for border communities such as Delta. Road maintenance is a major issue because of the isolated location of the road, but also because of the weather and materials used in the construction. During the rainy season, in December and July, the road is swallowed up by heavy floodwaters due to its close proximity to the Rio San Juan and other tributaries. The road material consisting of large river rocks (not native to the region) gets displaced and washed away by the strong currents, leaving massive craters in the water’s wake. On multiple occasions during this research, the school and public bus could not traverse the damaged roads. At other times due to flooding and old bridges that washed away, land transport came to a complete halt.

Local residents are keen to share their opinion on this situation. When asked about his community, one undocumented Delta resident of Nicaraguan origin (who has arduously worked on road repairs at the behest of his boss) responded:
Para mi esta comunidad es muy bonita aquí. Me gusta mucho. Diay, por eso no me puedo ir de aquí de este lugar, porque me gusta aquí. Y nada más lo que hace falta es como poner agua potable, componer un poco el camino. [Quincho 1:51]

To me, this community here is very nice and I like it a lot. That’s why I won’t leave this place. What it is missing, and nothing more, is potable water and some road repairs. [Quincho 1:51]

This resident’s humble suggestion should not be taken lightly. This particular individual has dedicated entire days to carrying out the intensive labor of moving and redistributing rock and earth to repair the road in order to earn a living. This undesirable task falls primarily on the backs of the Nicaraguan population in Delta. The community works year-round to maintain safe travel conditions on the road and the community’s involvement in road maintenance runs deep. The landowners collectively built the original road, *el camino real*. Before *la trocha* was ever imagined, there already existed a trail carved out and used by locals to move animals between farms and border villages. They could use this trail to reach the nearest community accessible by truck in order to move livestock to market.

In the pre-conflict era, the local farmers worked to build the road, contributing whatever machinery they could to remove trees, cut branches, unearth material, and build up a raised trail that was traversable during the dry season. Locals refer to this route as *el camino real* and they often boast that their road was made of better material and was better maintained than *la trocha*. Occasionally, a single ATV or all-wheel drive truck would make it all the way to Delta via the *camino real*. Locals residents enjoyed telling stories of how passengers would have to jump out at each property line to move the pasture fences and at times push the vehicles so they could eke by in the mud. Longtime residents cherish these memories that stem from when they were first settling in Delta and building the community. Since the *camino real* was only traversable half of the year, it was primarily used to move animals or building supplies/equipment. During the other
half of the year, residents continued to use the San Juan River as the main form of transportation. It was, in fact, along this important aquatic route that current landowners first arrived at Delta since it connected via water to places in San Carlos, such as Boca Arenal and Muelle de San Carlos. As one longtime resident explained:


...Entonces todos los finqueros, estos que hay aquí vinieron por bote. En embarcaciones hasta que hicieron una trocha. Comenzaron a entrar, el que rompió esta trocha fue Walter Perraza Fernández. Fue el que metió el carro, un Hilux, lo metió hasta aquí.

Flaca: [42:42] Because there was no road. Who made the roads? The very same farmers (landowners). Here, the road was made by the landowners, in order to get here. Because the form to arrive here was by water, from Terrón Colorado to Delta, Costa Rica. Boca de San Carlos or Muelle de San Carlos has always existed because it was a dock. Listen up, Muelle was a dock where ships arrived from Limon. The mail traveled from Muelle de San Carlos to Limon. You understand? What existed there was a tiny canal, a tiny river and they turned it into the dry channel—the one, that goes to Tortuguero and to Limon. Many years ago.

And so…all the landowners, those that were here had come by boat. [It was all] in boats up until they made the border road. They [the landowners] began to come in. The one who forged this trail was Walter Perraza Fernandez. It was he who brought in the [first] car, a [Toyota] Hilux. He brought it in right up to here.

The story of forging the camino real and ushering in the first car was talked about frequently. It was often among land-owning community leaders in response to complaints about the road and the best plan of action to persuade the federal government to come and repair the route. Everyone in the community cared about the road condition. When travelers would arrive at Delta, they would always be asked to provide an update on the condition of the road and the bridges. Similar to daily discussions of the changing river conditions, this was spoken about on a
regular basis. Since these two routes connect Delta to the rest of the nation, they are highly discussed, regularly monitored, and prioritized among collective community action.

When the territorial dispute broke out and the decision was made by President Chinchilla to build a border road, the final stretch of la trocha leading to Delta was built on top of the camino real. Without a doubt, this development was initially greatly welcomed by the community. However, the road was constructed using material from outside the region consisting of large river rocks. The material was hauled in, dumped, and then steam-rolled. The border road was declared a federal roadway, thus necessitating government maintenance and the use of heavy machinery. The rocks are so large that locals can no longer participate in the upkeep of the road. Since the community now relies on the road more so than the river to access the heartland and nearest market, when heavy rains and flooding render the road an obstacle (damaging cars and even halting the bus service), it is a source of serious contention and a vivid reminder of the marginalized relationship residents of the region have with the state.

Some residents expressed the belief that the local police should assist road maintenance. As one community member explained:

*Se han confundido mucho la ayuda policial, porque antes el policía era comunitario y ahora difícilmente usted ve un policía colaborando en la comunidad. En las épocas de la guardia rural usted veía un policía remendando las carreteras, usted veía un policía dando clases...y ahora difícilmente los ve.* [Emilio, 12:30]

They have very much confused police assistance because before, the police were community police and nowadays it is difficult to find a police officer collaborating in the community. During the era of the rural guard, you would see a police officer patching the roads, you would see a police officer teaching classes...and now it’s difficult to see that. [Emilio, 12:30]

The police, however, do not participate in upkeep or maintenance of the road. When local repairs are attempted, they typically involve a group of local landowners supplying the labor in the form of hired migrant workers to fill holes or to chop back the jungle so vehicles can
maneuver around the massive potholes and arrive at their destination. The community’s concern for the condition of the road is a constant struggle. Landowners often reach out to contact within the municipal government in Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí with pleas for assistance. It is not the case that the community was better off without the road; however, had the state consulted with local residents on design, environmental factors, and a sustainable maintenance plan, it would have saved a lot of money and made for a more successful and manageable project on multiple levels.

Limited Bus Service

When the road is in a functioning state, there are many benefits to the community. With the construction of the road came public bus service to the nearest city, Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí. Another bus was brought in to take students to the nearest high school, in the village of Aldea. Three days a week (Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays), the public bus leaves Delta and makes the long, slow, and dusty journey through the jungle to the city. Although the schedule is limited, it provides an option for residents to leave and make purchases or run important errands. Many locals, however, rarely leave because it is an expensive trip that takes an entire day. The bus leaves at 5:00 am and returns to the village the same day at 5:00 pm. To avoid the long trek and paying the fare, it is more common for residents of Delta to ask the chauffeur to run an errand for them. Typically, it is a simple task such as buying a pre-paid phone card to add minutes to their cell phone, picking up a bottle of liquor, or purchasing an item at the farm supply store or fabric store. On other occasions, it may be making a purchase on behalf of the school, such as an ink cartridge for the printer or decorations for a special event. A tip is provided to the bus driver for providing this service. This option used by residents to access resources from the city, however, is carried out solely at the discretion of the driver and his
schedule. For that reason, it could take days or even a week before one’s goods arrive. As a result, the goods and services from the city are still out of reach for most community members.

The new border road also expanded educational opportunities for local teenagers to attend high school. Before the road and bus service existed, there was no way for high school students to reach the school, which is an hour and a half away by bus. Now, the students can rely on the bus to take them to school five days a week. During the time of this study, only five students were riding the bus from Delta to the school. Four of those students lived in a community further down the river known as Delta, Colorado. These students left home every day around 4:00 am, travel by boat and arrived at Delta at 5:00 am to catch the school bus. From there they ride an hour and a half down the road to reach the high school. They make the same reverse commute on their way home, arriving back at Delta around 3:00 pm, hopping back into their boats and heading downstream. For the students from these villages, it is an enormous commitment on their behalf, and that is without considering the cost of school supplies and how their studies detract from farm production. Without the road and the bus service, it would be impossible for students in Delta and the surrounding area to continue their studies. For parents, it presents a new dilemma as they weigh the costs and benefits of sending their children to high school. In particular, with the student from Delta who was transitioning to high school, the local school board was influential in convincing the mother to send her son to study. The school board helped to cover some of the costs, such as his uniform, supplies, and a backpack. Local members of the school board also regularly checked in with him to ask how school was going and to provide encouragement.
Let There Be Light

The creation of Ruta 1856 Juan Rafael Mora Porras or the border road was not a stand-alone project. The infrastructural development plan for the border region (overseen by the Chinchilla administration) also included the installation of electricity, a telecommunications tower, two primary schools (one of which is in Delta), and a build-up of the Costa Rican security apparatus—which included surveillance cameras, a heliport, and additions to the police post. The electricity line runs along the border road to Delta and then abruptly stops. Border residents who happened to live along the road up until and including the border outpost at Delta were fortunate enough to benefit from the installation. However, residents who lived further down the river and on the other side of the Colorado River on Isla Calero did not receive electricity service. Instead, they were given the choice to enter into a monthly payment plan in exchange for a solar panel that they can use to power small electronics in their homes. In most cases, this amounts to one light bulb, a radio, a small television, or the energy needed to charge a cell phone. Some border residents who opted into the solar panel plans expressed frustration that they were unable to power larger appliances such as a refrigerator to store dairy products such as cheese and milk that are produced on their farms. Others explained how difficult it was to make the payments because it involved a long day trip to Puerto Viejo and standing in lines (a task the bus driver is not willing to do). For many villagers, the consequence of having an outstanding balance with the national electric company, known by its acronym ICE, simply is not enough motivation to forfeit work and make the trip.

Nonetheless, and as one can imagine, the advent of electricity in Delta, Costa Rica was highly welcomed. Those who were lucky enough to receive the utility service rely on the power for common household appliances and, perhaps most importantly, to supply energy to electric
pumps that extract water from ground wells to raised holding tanks. This water is stored in the tanks and later used for cooking, cleaning, and bathing. The electricity also powers a new telecommunications tower that extends high above the treetops, providing cellular and internet service within a short proximity. With the advent of electricity, technology in Delta advanced from candlelight to WhatsApp, Facebook, and a 3G network in a few short years. In addition, with so few users utilizing the cellular signal, residents often joke that it is the fastest internet service in the country. Power outages, however, are very normal and border residents are well versed in the power-loss routine. As it was explained to me and as I quickly learned, there is a window of time after the power goes out before the cell phone signal drops. The power reserve on the cellular tower has roughly a four-hour battery life and then the internet and cellular service die. Flashlights, batteries, and candles are thus still highly valued but are of limited supply in the border region. The emergency radio in the general store is powered by a solar panel so that emergency calls can still be made by radio to the Red Cross if assistance is needed. This is often the case with extended outages as they are typically caused by severe weather such as heavy rains and flooding. On multiple occasions, I witnessed Flaca and other members of the local development agency call for help during extreme floods that left farm workers stranded without food and unwilling to leave their animals.

Other infrastructural developments that accompanied the new electricity line were of less benefit to the villagers. Located directly below the communications tower is a helicopter pad that was built as part of the border development plan. It is an unimpressive, square patch of stones marked with an orange aviation windsock. However, it serves to receive the rare political big-wigs who dare to venture out of San Jose to the ‘front lines’ of the conflict zone.
Figure 7. The telecommunications tower, heliport and police quarters in the center of Delta, Costa Rica
Cross-Border Emergency Medical Service

Another huge advancement that arrived in Delta, under the pretext of conflict with the border road, is emergency ambulance service provided by the Red Cross. Prior to the creation of the road, there simply was no way for an ambulance to reach the community. Local residents who were experiencing an emergency had to make their way by boat to a village about two hours away that had access to a road where the ambulance could arrive to assist them and transport them to the nearest medical clinic or hospital. If they did not have the means to get to the village (access to a boat and substantial gasoline), they would try to find someone to take them or suffer through their medical emergency without receiving professional attention. For this reason, less than five years ago, the majority of babies were born at home (without a birth certificate and thus without government-recognized nationality).

Currently, with the available land route and all-terrain response vehicle, in a best-case scenario the Red Cross can be in Delta in as little as two and a half hours. As an emergency responder explained to me, however, it could take up to five hours and there is no guarantee that the ambulance will actually show up. Many factors complicate servicing such a remote locale, the most crucial being the weather and road conditions. As in any place, these factors play a significant role in response time. However, in the swampy jungle marked by climatic extremes and rough terrain, it is possible that the ambulance cannot respond.

Equally important, as described to me by a Red Cross professional, is the availability of ambulances. Serving a province with over 80,000 people, the Red Cross operates a fleet of eight outdated ambulances, of which at any given time about six are in suitable mechanical condition to circulate.
Limited and inadequate resources, coupled with harsh conditions and an extremely remote location, provide for a less-than-ideal situation in a best-case scenario. However, the current procedure for emergency extractions from the region is an improvement from not having land access several years ago. Additional resources and infrastructural maintenance (especially to the road) will assist in providing better quality healthcare and assistance to residents of the border region.

The new public service of emergency medical support via land to the community of Delta was met with some social challenges as well. Now aware that a vehicle would come and provide (free) transportation to the city if called, some residents requested the ambulance services without experiencing a true emergency. In other words, as one Red Cross worker described, they were using it as a ‘taxi service.’ Obviously, this is problematic for many reasons. Not only does it drive up costs for the Red Cross, but more significantly it utilizes an ambulance that could be used to service a legitimate emergency. After experiencing this in Delta, the Red Cross decided to address the problem with a social education campaign. They had to teach community members what the ambulance service is and is not used for. They also had to inform the community members what constitutes an emergency and how to properly contact the Red Cross when in need.

For non-life-threatening conditions, Nicaraguans (from both sides of the border) generally go to the walk-in medical clinic in San Juan del Norte (also known as Greytown), Nicaragua to receive medical attention. It is free, open regularly, and quite good (based on personal experience). Without leaving the region, border residents also have the option of seeing a doctor in Fatima (a Costa Rican village one hour away by car) who comes once every fifteen days and will see a maximum of twenty people per visit. Because the availability of the doctor
within Costa Rican territory is so limited, anyone in pain who can scrape together the bus fare will leave by bus to avoid waiting two weeks for the doctor. Healthcare is universal in both Costa Rica and Nicaragua, so for non-emergency treatment, border residents typically go to their country of birth to seek attention.

However, in emergency situations that require attention in a hospital, the protocol in the border region is different. There is no hospital in San Juan del Norte, Nicaragua, and there is no land access to the Nicaraguan interior. To reach a Nicaraguan hospital, an individual must travel four to five hours by high-speed boat. For these reasons, in an emergency, it makes more sense to seek out medical attention in a Costa Rican hospital. Since Delta is literally located at the end of the Costa Rican border road, it serves as the regional hub for emergency assistance to people living further downstream, in both Costa Rica and in Nicaragua. Depending on their location, if they have cellular service and/or a phone, borderland residents experiencing an emergency will call ahead to the general store at Delta and report the emergency to request an ambulance. Flaca, who serves as the local point person for the *Comisión de Emergencia*, coordinates with the Red Cross of Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí and an ambulance will respond. She makes the request to the Red Cross via solar-powered radio. It has a public channel and is constantly powered on rendering airwave chatter and beeping noises, a constant background distraction in the general store. When the medical clinic in San Juan del Norte, Nicaragua cannot treat a life-threatening injury or illness, they too will call Flaca and coordinate for the patient to be transported out of the zone via the Costa Rican Red Cross. Regardless of nationality, the ambulance will transport the patient for treatment in a Costa Rican hospital. In the few examples that I witnessed while living in Delta, the cross-border patient exchange for emergency medical attention was flawless.
It was late morning when Flaca received the phone call from San Juan del Norte. It was the mother of the mayor of San Juan that was on the other end of the line. She informed Flaca that there was a person in critical condition who needed to get to a hospital. Flaca called the Red Cross using her dispatch radio and coordinated the ambulance. She confirmed with the mayor’s office in San Juan del Norte and continued about her daily business. Roughly an hour later she came by my cabina in a long sleeve shirt and a hat, which I knew meant she was heading out on the river. She told me she was going fishing and to tell the Red Cross workers that the keys to the kitchen are hanging on the post in the entryway in case they wanted some coffee. I agreed and she was off.

By early afternoon the ambulance arrived. They actually reached Delta before the boat from Nicaragua carrying the patient arrived. I let them into Flaca’s kitchen and kept them company. Before long we could see that the boat was crossing the river from the Nicaraguan immigration/military post making its way toward Delta. On board were two doctors, the boat driver, the patient and her father. The patient was a young girl, around 10 years old. Her father carried her from the boat with a blue jean jacket draped over her head. From what I gathered, she had broken her ribs and I believe was experiencing internal bleeding. Once the patient was on Costa Rican soil, the Nicaragua Ministry of Health (MINSA) workers loaded her into the Costa Rican ambulance. The father climbed into the ambulance and silently leaned over his daughter. Neither the father nor the daughter spoke a word to anyone. Informed that a patient would be arriving from Nicaragua, a Costa Rican border patrol officer came from the Desta post to record the names of the people involved in the medical transfer. The MINSA doctors reported their names and relayed the names of those seeking treatment. The Red Cross workers also gave their names and ID numbers to the border police and within a matter of minutes they were off. The MINSA doctors climbed back down Flaca’s make shift dock and onto their boat. With their heads tucked low to shield the wind, they sped off across the river in the direction of Nicaraguan.
Although these scenarios were rare (I witnessed only two Nicaraguan patients extracted from Delta via ambulance in my fifteen months of research), this protocol requires and represents an excellent form of transborder cooperation. There was very little delay in taking down the names of the people involved in the transactions, and within minutes both parties were off. What is especially interesting is that the Costa Rican police post at Delta is not an immigration post and therefore is not a formal port of entry into the country. So, in this scenario, the entrance of the patient and her father into Costa Rica was not a legal entry. The border patrol is aware of this and thus complicit in the passage of Nicaraguan nationals into Costa Rica without a state-authorized legal entry. In this circumstance, as I would argue it should be, the
dire humanitarian need of this young girl temporarily trumped border divides based on nationality.

In a second emergency situation that I observed, a Nicaraguan man who was bitten by a fer-de-lance or *terciopelo* while in the fields was also extracted in a cross-border fashion. However, he was transported by boat across the border. The Nicaraguan vessel crossed the river delta and stopped briefly at the Costa Rican police post before continuing on to meet the ambulance further upstream. In the race against time as the venom spread through his body, it was best not to wait for the ambulance at Delta. His fate, of not surviving the snake bite, speaks to the sheer isolation of the region and the real need for a working cross-border system for emergency medical services.

During the time of this study, I never witnessed a Costa Rican utilize the ambulance service. One simple reason for this could be that villagers are extremely aware of how far away medical attention is and, when possible, they anticipate their medical needs and leave the border region beforehand. Most people employ this strategy. While it is difficult for all community members to coordinate a trip to the interior because one has to find someone to watch over property and animals and arrange transportation and a place to stay, it is nonetheless easier for Costa Ricans than Nicaraguans. Those who leave rely on their extended families or the extended families of other border residents who live in more centrally located areas to provide housing and food while they seek medical attention or attend follow-up appointments. For migrants who typically do not have family in centrally located towns, it is especially difficult to find places to stay and to navigate unfamiliar cities.

For example, two Costa Rican students of mine at the local school, ages 10 and 8, left mid-year with their Costa Rican mother, Josefina, when she was pregnant and nearing the end of
her term. The father of the family stayed behind to continue working on the farm and the children and mother went to stay with her family in the town of San Carlos, Costa Rica, where she ultimately gave birth and cared for the child with the help of her mother before returning to the border region several months later.

Drawing upon extended kinship or fictive kinship networks within Costa Rica during times of need is much easier for Costa Rican members of the community. While it was relatively easy for the Costa Rican mother to plan her childbirth accordingly, this was not the case for another young mother who was giving birth for the first time. Unlike Josefina, who came to Delta from San Carlos, Costa Rica with her husband to administer the farm of a wealthy landowner, young Mariana was born in the border region to undocumented Nicaraguan migrants with significantly fewer resources. Mariana went into labor four days before her due date in the wee hours of the morning in her family’s farm house. It was brought to my attention around 9:00 am when Flaca and her cousin came knocking at my cabina door. They explained that the mother had asked them to inquire if I would be willing to give them a ride to the nearest hospital using my car. The mother later told me that they had planned on leaving by bus the previous day, but it was broken down and never left Delta. Their Plan ‘B’ was to use her son-in-law’s truck, but that also did not come to fruition as he was out of the border region at the livestock market.

I, of course, agreed and Flaca’s cousin said he would drive. Frantic, I quickly got my things together and we headed down to pick up Mariana and her mother at their farm. We then departed for the (nearly three-hour) car ride to the hospital. The roads, although in good condition at the time, were still rough enough that poor Mariana, lying with her head in her mother’s lap, felt every painful bump. When we started off, I tried to create some small talk to comfort her. I asked if she knew the sex of the baby and what names she was considering. It
would be a boy, perhaps by the name of Derek or Damien. Roughly forty-five minutes into the
trek, her contractions were getting much stronger and closer together. From that point on,
Mariana, who only spoke a few words the entire trip, grew silent. As each contraction passed,
tears quietly rolled down her face. Anytime we reached a spot in the road with cell service, I
pulled up information and sent questions to friends of mine who practice medicine. I timed the
contractions, holding Mariana’s hand with each contraction.

As we sped into town, Mariana’s mom told me to take off Mariana’s undergarments and
check to see if she was crowning. Mariana’s mother was the local midwife and she was well
versed in delivering babies. She kept Mariana on her side as we ran red lights and went down
one-way streets on the edge of the city. As we pulled into the emergency room, I yelled to a
doctor that she was in labor and they immediately brought a stretcher to the car. They helped her
climb out of the car and onto the stretcher. One female doctor covered her exposed private areas
before rapidly wheeling her off. Her mother and I followed them in a few seconds later. Mariana
gave birth minutes upon arriving to the hospital to a healthy baby boy.

Experiencing this hectic emergency first-hand is a perfect example of how isolated and
devoid of resources the community of Delta really is. One must take extreme precautions and
plan accordingly in an attempt to avoid situations like Mariana’s. However, there are events in
life such as childbirth that cannot always be anticipated. In Mariana’s case, she was lucky to find
access to a vehicle and a driver familiar enough with the region to get her to a doctor in time.
While Mariana’s mother most likely could have delivered the baby, the urgency to arrive at the
hospital not only revolved around safety but also around birth documentation. It is necessary for
border residents living on the Costa Rican side of the frontier to reach a hospital in order to
obtain a Costa Rican birth certificate for the baby.
Aside from providing access during medical emergencies, the new border road serves a multitude of other purposes. It provides the border police with a land route to bring in equipment and supplies. It also allows police to conduct surveillance patrols of the border. For community members, it connects farmers to regional markets providing a way to transport livestock to auction in cattle trucks. A delivery truck also utilizes the road, making its way once a week to Delta to sell animal feed and other farm supplies. At other times, middlemen such as cheese vendors and distributors navigate the road to purchase goods from local farmers. There is also a driver who comes twice a week to sell day-old fruits and vegetables to those who can afford it. The new border road, which was a direct security response to the conflict, has brought about huge changes that only five years ago were unimaginable to the residents of Delta, Costa Rica.

This infrastructural development has not only improved the lives of community members, but it has also reshaped the way they interact with the Costa Rican state. As community members now rely on the border road as a primary form of transportation, they also must rely on the state to repair it. This issue forced the local Development Association to make repeated phone calls to the municipality requesting repairs and materials. When the road got so bad that the school bus was getting stuck in the holes, the community leaders even drafted a letter to the Costa Rican president asking for help. As mentioned previously, road maintenance continues to be a major problem for the community. In situations like Mariana’s, it can make all the difference. Her case shows that particular individuals—for example, those with less resources (primarily migrants)—may be more negatively affected when the basic services in Delta are not available, whether that be the bus service, the road, the school, or any other resource.
The Potable Water Challenge

As the conflict drew millions of dollars in development funds into regional projects during the territorial dispute, the Costa Rican government conveniently avoided one of the area’s gravest problems, water. There is no potable water in Delta or the surrounding areas, so most residents resort to catching and storing rainwater in large plastic barrels. Although Delta is located near the end of a fresh water alluvial system, the river water that runs to Delta is contaminated with toxic agrochemicals, natural waste in the form of sediment/debris, and manmade garbage. The river water is used as a last resort (especially during the dry season) for watering livestock, washing clothes, or bathing, but it can never be used as drinking water. Most houses have wells, but they produce varying levels of water quality. Also, since the underground earth is sandy, the wells tend to cave in or produce dirty water. Some wells use rudimentary water pumps to extract and elevate the water to plastic tanks perched atop concrete columns using gravitational force for distribution. Even the houses with the best wells have two separate spigots, one running water from the well for washing and the other running rainwater used solely for drinking.

The standard drinking water setup consists of at least one plastic barrel to catch and collect rainwater. The school has its own rainwater barrel and a poorly constructed well. The police use water from a neighboring well owned by the local Development Association for washing and bathing. Their drinking water, however, is shipped in and consists of individually-sized plastic water bottles. The police are the only people in the entire region who have reliable access to potable water. Their water supply is not shared with the community and the small bottles produce large amounts of plastic waste, which then have to be hauled out of the region to a recycling facility in Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí.
In the household water systems, the rainwater runs down the zinc roofs (which can be problematic due to metal transfer) and is then stored stagnant in the barrel, typically uncovered. Family members also draw on this water to drink, but also to bathe, wash, or cook. Cross-contamination can occur from scooping the water with soapy hands or dirty water pitchers.

During an interview with the Red Cross, an aid worker recalled details from a home visit:

> Yo me fijo en el tanque, tanque lleno de hojas. Los chiquitos van al servicio, van al baño y pasan y se lavan las manos en el tanque. Ahí mismo pasa el señor coge el jarro lo mete el mismo y toma agua. Ahí mismo llega la señora coge agua a la olla y se va a cocinar. Entonces, es un tanque contaminado.

I look at the tank. The tank is full of leaves. The little ones go to the toilet, they go to the bathroom and they pass and they wash their hands in the tank. Right then, the man picks up the jug and puts it in the water and drinks from it. Then the lady arrives and takes water to the pot and goes to cook. So it’s a contaminated tank.

To combat the problem of contamination in families’ primary source of water and to provide a potable water option to local households, the Red Cross distributed countertop water filtration systems and clean storage buckets. The idea is for the rainwater to be filtered through the system and then stored for consumption in clean, sealed buckets within the home. However, as the aid workers explained, it was difficult to encourage residents to break with old habits. A large part of their clean water campaign entailed educating the public on how to use the systems.

When I asked the aid workers if they believed the filtration systems would ultimately be used correctly, they were pessimistic in their responses.

> ¿Entonces, la gente por costumbre...es más fácil, si yo tengo sed yo tengo el bidón en la cocina arriba y tengo el tanque de agua receptor abajo y yo llego, donde tomo yo agua? Tomo primero abajo. Es más cerca ...O el chiquito le dice a la mama “Mami regálame un vaso con agua.” “Tome del tanque porque ahorita estoy ocupado.” No, no...Entonces la señora le dice coja del tanque porque yo estoy ocupado... Es falta de costumbre. Que la gente puede llegar acostumbrarse si, pero lleva su tiempo. (30:55)
So, the people [act] out of custom… it’s just easier. If I am thirsty and the drum is in the kitchen upstairs and I have the [rain]water tank receptor below, where do I go to drink water? Down below, its closer…. Or the little one says to the mom, ‘Mom, give me a glass of water.’ [She responds] ‘Take it from the tank because I’m busy right now.’ No, no (shaking his head in disapproval). So the woman tells him to take it from the tank because she is busy… It’s bad habit. People can get used to it, yes, but it takes time. (30:55)

The aid workers went on to explain how they have seen people use the potable water storage buckets to milk the cows because the buckets are new, clean, and have a lid. They also said that people have used the perfectly good, new buckets to plant plants for decoration. These observations depict how some of the greatest challenges in delivering potable water to the residents of Delta not only rest in infrastructure and development projects but also in changing social habits and local customs. Even considering the Red Cross’ substantial investment in the water filters, their education and outreach efforts across multiple visits, and a strong relationship with the community, it remained difficult to change local water usage habits. The complexities
described in this example portray some of the nuances that the state did not even consider when they undertook the border development project. In the case of the potable water challenge, the state was only interested in finding a reliable solution for the police force.

Furthermore, the chance of the Instituto Costarricense de Acueductos y Alcantarillados (AyA), the Costa Rican public water and sewage utility, developing infrastructure to deliver potable water to the region is nonexistent. An international branch of the Rotary Club appeared in Delta at one point and showed interest in undertaking the task. They even went so far as to take water samples from multiple locations in the region. However, after community leaders chauffeured them around for a day, they were never heard from again. The battle for potable water in Delta (and many rural communities in Costa Rica) continues, taking on multiple dynamics at the state, regional, local, and personal level. Of all of the houses that I visited in fifteen months of research, I never saw one person use the Red Cross water filtration device correctly. Although the systems were administered to all of the families, the tanks were strangely absent in many kitchens and I never saw one person draw upon one of the red and white buckets for drinking water—not even the local president of the Emergency Commission, who is the local representative of the Red Cross in Delta. She used hers to store bread so the cat would not eat it!

**A School With No Water**

The water problem existed long before the start of the Chinchilla administration’s development plan. However, a big part of the initiative was the construction of two new primary schools, one of which is located in Delta. The other facility, similar in size and design, is located in the village of San Antonio, several miles upriver. The previous school in Delta was constructed by community members and was made entirely of wood. It had no running water, no electricity, and the sanitation facilities consisted of an outhouse with a pit latrine. The old one-
room school house was constructed in Delta after the onset of the conflict in October of 2010. Previous to the Delta wooden schoolhouse, border students (from Nicaragua and Costa Rica) used a Costa Rican school located directly on the Rio San Juan on Isla Calero, very close to the conflicted territory. During the initial months of the border conflict, the school was abandoned because the Costa Rican teacher who was assigned to the school stopped showing up, citing fear due to the dispute. At the start of the school year in February of 2011, when the one-room wooden schoolhouse opened, eight students ranging from first to fifth grade belonged to the first cohort of students. They were all of Nicaraguan nationality. In 2015, the year that I spent volunteering at the school, 50% or six out of the twelve students were of Nicaraguan nationality. Of the six Costa Rican students, four of them were first-generation Costa Ricans—in other words, children of Nicaraguan migrants who happened to be born on the Costa Rican side of the border.

The new school that was constructed as part of the border development plan is a huge improvement from the wooden schoolhouse. It is made of concrete and the floors are finished in ceramic tiles. It has electricity and a toilet and the structure is divided into two rooms, one which serves as a classroom and the other as a cafeteria. The kitchen space in the back of the cafeteria boasts a refrigerator, a coffee maker, and a two-burner gas stovetop. Each day a woman comes and prepares a small lunchtime meal for the students using these facilities. Although the new school is bigger, better, and safer, it is still a work in progress. The school struggles to comply with mandatory state regulations, such as enclosing the school property with fencing. For these projects, the municipality sends part of the construction materials, but the junta de educación or local school board has to come up with the remainder of the supplies as well as oversee the labor and timely completion of the work. For larger tasks that require specialized skills and tools,
Figure 10. Above: Border Police in 2011 patrolling the frontier in front of the schoolhouse on Isla Calero (green building in the background) that was abandoned due to the conflict.

Below: The community’s solution to the closing of the border school. A makeshift wooden schoolhouse was erected by community leaders in Delta in 2011, so students could continue their studies.
la junta de educación contracts skilled workers (friends, family, and acquaintances) from San Carlos to complete the projects. The name of local individuals and signatures are placed on the final paperwork to make it appear as though community members were involved in, paid for, and prioritized for the work. This is just one example of local landowners controlling the flow and distribution of labor and resources. This topic is discussed further in Chapter 5.

Other projects are also in the works at the school. There are plans to construct a soccer field where the students (and community members) can partake in recreational activities. Between the spikey jungle flora and fauna, impenetrable swampy wetlands, and tall grasses full of biting insects and snakes, there exists no real recreation space for community members to exercise or play. Other works that are ongoing at the school include maintenance tasks such as painting the zinc roof to keep it from rusting and the regular chapea or upkeep of the outdoor patio and grounds. This work is performed by local migrants at the behest of their landowning patróns. The migrants (peons) are paid by their bosses. As discussed in Chapter 5, the peons are paid to complete this work and this arrangement is viewed on a community level as the patróns’ contribution or support for the project. Landowners are expected to contribute equally in this form as it is part of a proper patrón’s responsibility. When this responsibility is not upheld or shared, it becomes a source of contention.

The greatest problem, however, at the school is access to potable water. Like the majority of the houses in the community, the school drinking water is harvested from rain and stored in a large black water tank perched above the building on concrete raisers. During the rainy season, the harvested water is used for all purposes, including cooking and cleaning. However, during the dry months when there is little to no rainfall for weeks, the school children do not have water to drink, let alone to wash their hands or flush the toilets. When this situation occurred during my
fieldwork, the teacher would send the oldest boy over to the general store to fill up a five-gallon water jug from a non-potable well that could then be used for handwashing, cooking, and cleaning. For drinking water, the students would show up mid-morning to ask Flaca for her rainwater, filling up plastic soda bottles or juice cartons to take back with them to school. On one occasion, Flaca knew that the school had no water and she was perplexed when the oldest boy was never sent to retrieve the usual daily supply. She went to the school after lunchtime and the woman who was in charge of the kitchen had already left for the day. Upon discovering that lunch had indeed been served, she reprimanded the teacher for allowing the school cook to use dirty well water from the shallow well to prepare lunch that day.

Field Notes

Flaca came back from the school upset. She said Marta left the kitchen a mess. She was mad, so she went back with Adriana to clean it up. She said Marta had cooked for 2 days with the well water, which is dirty and not potable. She said the walls were covered in grease and ‘que todo era cochinada’ or everything was a mess! She asked Herman, the teacher, what he would do if all the kids get sick and were vomiting and they have to call an ambulance? What will he say then? She said they have to use the water from her house or send for it. She was angry and venting to Adriana that she does everything for the school. That she pays for the ‘chapea,’ that none of the parents send peons to help, and that the only peon that ever shows up to help cut all the decorative plants that she had planted there. She said that she and the school board are going to have to talk to the cook.

[Fieldnotes 8/4/15]
Figure 11. Flaca closing down the new school after doing a routine check

The unprotected well at the school is a breeding ground for harmful pathogens, yet it is the only source of water for the children when no rainwater is available. Not only is the water situation at the school extremely dangerous and non-hygienic, but the absence of potable water is a violation of human rights, and it is a normal occurrence during the dry season at the school in Delta, Costa Rica.

The construction of the school in Delta, Costa Rica without a reliable source of potable water is at best an example of the disconnect between a state-funded rural development project and the needs of the community. It raises the question of how a multimillion-dollar development project (estimates range from $5.6 million to $90 million in total costs) ended with a road without bridges and a school without potable water? A simple answer is the embezzlement

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scandal and corruption through which public officials siphoned money. However, upon closer examination and considering the urgent context of the development plan, it is very clear that these projects were initiated to serve the purpose of the police and that the schools and community were an afterthought.

More startling is that while the children went without water during the dry season, the only people in the community with potable water were the police. The police officers receive thousands of plastic water bottles for their personal consumption. Not only does it produce excessive waste, but it sends the message that the needs of state security personnel are more important than those of the community. If the state is sending in a potable water supply for the police, they are unable to claim that they are not aware of the water situation. The police’s need for potable water should not outweigh those of the community, especially those of children who are attending Costa Rican schools.

It is also important to note how the extension of electricity, telecommunications, surveillance cameras, land access via a border road, and a heliport are infrastructural advancements necessary for increased security in the border region. These resources and investments were brought to the region for the sole benefit of the police. While some of the regional development initiatives also benefit the community, the types of projects, lack of attention to community needs, and, most importantly, the timing of the investments convey that if it were not for the border conflict, the people of Delta, Costa Rica would still be waiting for “development” to arrive. In many ways, they still are.
Figure 12. Children at the local school reuse the limited supply of water that was retrieved from the well at the general store that morning while participating in shared cleaning responsibilities.

Figure 13. Border police at the Delta post receive a shipment of bottled drinking water. The officer pictured above carries two bottles of water in his pant pocket while a black garbage bag full of empty water bottles in the distance is ready to be loaded and hauled off.
CHAPTER 3: POLITICAL NARRATIVES AND THE (RE)-MAKING OF AN INTERNATIONAL CONFLICT

Attention was paid in the previous chapter to the state’s vast infrastructural and developmental initiatives during the international border dispute between Costa Rica and Nicaragua that drastically changed life in the border community of Delta. As I argued, it was conflict-driven development framed as a “war project.” This next chapter focuses on the political climate on both sides of the border that fueled these massive changes, focusing on firsthand political narratives by national-level leaders. This is an in-depth look at the rhetoric and explanations of two political leaders, in particular, who were in power during the 2010-2015 border dispute, playing a central role as the events of the dispute unfolded. The first is Edén Atanacio Pastora Gómez, a Nicaraguan politician and former guerilla leader, who currently holds a ministerial post in charge of development along the Rio San Juan basin in Sandinista President Daniel Ortega’s administration. The second narrative presented in this chapter is that of Luis Guillermo Solís Rivera, a Costa Rican academic turned politician who succeeded Chinchilla as president and served in that role from 2014 to 2018. Both narratives are based on primary source accounts captured through the use of semi-structured, formal interviewing. They are employed here to depict the justifications and public reasoning for the security and developmental responses to the conflict. By presenting these narratives, a larger and more complex picture of the political underpinnings of this dispute is revealed.

**Edén Pastora aka Comandante Cero**

In many ways, Edén Pastora is the conflict. It was he who, along with Sandinista troops, crossed the Rio San Juan into Costa Rican territory in October of 2010. This was almost immediately following the start of a river-dredging project led by Pastora and, as previously noted, the breach of sovereignty led quickly to international escalation. Pastora was the political...
mastermind behind the conflict, responsible for managing the propaganda and nationalistic narrative that further perpetuated the border problem. He was in charge of Sandinista troops in the region in addition to the equipment and personnel of the controversial river-dredging project. Pastora has deep ties to the border region and resides in his jungle home in San Juan del Norte several weeks of each month. He and his family members arrive to the region via chartered planes, flying into the airport that he proudly commissioned a few miles southwest of town.

Pastora is a controversial Nicaraguan figure. He is a former Sandinista guerilla best known for his role in overthrowing the dictatorial Somoza regime by capturing the national palace in Managua in 1978. His nickname, *Comandante Cero* or Commander Zero, stems from this role he played in the early years of the Nicaraguan revolution. During his time as a guerilla leader, he led the southern front of the FSLN (Sandinista National Liberation Front). However, after the Sandinistas overthrew the Somoza regime, Pastora purportedly became disillusioned with the direction of the group. He separated from the Sandinistas and formed a counterrevolutionary movement in the Rio San Juan Basin known as ARDE (Democratic Revolutionary Alliance). This group was the southern front of the US-backed Contra fighters. The horrific 1984 La Penca bombing that took place on the Costa Rica-Nicaragua border, killing three journalists and injuring many others, was carried out as an assassination attempt against Pastora. His injuries and subsequent falling out with the C.I.A. kept him from the battlefield. Until the disarmament in 1990, he lived in the Costa Rican border community of Barra del Colorado running a fishing business. He allegedly spent the 1990s in Nicaragua but did not return to politics until the 2000s. After a failed presidential run in the 2006 Nicaraguan general elections with the Alternative for Change (AC) party, Pastora reconciled with the Sandinistas and
in particular Daniel Ortega, who granted him his current position as Minister of Development in the Rio San Juan Basin.

It was in this capacity that he initiated the river-dredging project in 2010 that provoked the border dispute between the neighboring nations. He played a major role in devising the Nicaraguan tactics and military responses during the border conflict as he purposefully aggravated political relations in local and international news outlets. As a result of environmental damage carried out by Pastora during the river-dredging project (the tilling of trees and cutting canals in Costa Rican territory), the Costa Rican government filed a legal indictment against Pastora in 2010. Nicaragua responded by also filing charges of environmental damage against Costa Rica for Chinchilla’s rushed work on the border road. These additional claims were ultimately combined into the same court case as the border demarcation question at the ICJ.

This very short background on Pastora’s life is important because it highlights two important factors that are often neglected when considering his role in the border dispute. The first is his deep connection to the border region, which includes his familiarity with the people who live there, on both the Costa Rican and Nicaraguan sides of the border. Many residents know Pastora on a personal level and many others fought alongside him during the Contra War. When I conducted preliminary research in Barra del Colorado in 2011, residents were quick to point out the village’s ties to Pastora. They proudly identified the concrete remains of his house and fishery located near the beach in Barra del Colorado Sur. They also recounted stories of hearing explosives going off on the beach, sounds they attributed to Pastora conducting military drills. They spoke of his paranoia and relationships he had there with women. As proof, some residents of Barra del Colorado pointed to a young, male student in my English class—a bastard grandson of Pastora himself!
Second, Pastora’s time spent fighting, fishing, living, and seeking refuge on the Costa Rican side of the border has provided him with an unparalleled familiarity of the regional geography. More specifically, since he personally utilized the geopolitical border to seek refuge during the Contra War, his position of not knowing where the border lies cannot be taken seriously. In fact, in my opinion, it is much more likely that his very nuanced understanding of border geography is what informed his crafting of the dispute in the first place as well as the subsequent calculated military and dredging actions in the region.

What follows here is a reconstructed synopsis, in his words, of what happened leading up to and during the border conflict. This account was recorded at his home during the conflict on October 27, 2015, several months before the International Court of Justice ruled on the border case in favor of Costa Rica.

*Tierra de Nadie*

The sun had just set and the darkness of night was quickly falling over the town of San Juan del Norte, Nicaragua. Using a flashlight, I followed an informant and his friend down a shadowy river path that winds between houses, through an industrial yard, and finally past a heavily-guarded military post before arriving at the home of Edén Pastora.

I knew before arriving that his perspective was crucial to understanding the border dispute and, more importantly, the political dynamics of the conflict. Pastora was waiting for us in his living room and he cordially greeted me with a double-cheek kiss. His wife was busy working her way through the kitchen and soon joined us in the living room with a plate of freshly cut pineapple as we got acquainted in oversized wooden rocking chairs. After introducing myself and explaining why I wanted to speak with him, Pastora delved enthusiastically into the history of the border region and his version of the international border dispute.
During the tumultuous years of armed conflict along the Rio San Juan during the Contra War of the 1980s, the historical village of Greytown, Nicaragua was burned to the ground and completely obliterated for the second time in history.\(^1\) It was later rebuilt several kilometers downstream as the town of San Juan del Norte,\(^2\) where it still stands today. During the 1990s and into the 2000s, before the start of the border conflict, San Juan del Norte and the surrounding marshlands that form part of a vast border waterway system were essentially forgotten by the Nicaraguan state. Before 2010, the Rio San Juan river basin and San Juan del Norte were referred to as *tierra de nadie* or a no-man’s land. The start of the border dispute in 2010 denotes a marked shift in the political project of reestablishing, reclaiming, and rebuilding San Juan del Norte and the region. Pastora touched on the isolation of the region in his narrative.

[1:01:30] Definitivamente ha habido un gran cambio. Hace 10 años aquí no había nada,... no no—hace 20 años, aquí no había nada. En todo esto, no había nada. Un pueblo que existía Greytown se había perdido cuando la guerra, San Juan del Norte.

Entonces aquí no había pueblo, no había población, no había nada. Cuando Dona Violeta vino hacer este pueblo de aquí...Doña Violeta lo hizo quedaron 4 casas de palma... 4 ranchos y se fue creciendo. Aquí no había policía, no había soldado, no había un juez, no había un profesor, no había un centro de salud.

There has definitely been a big change. 10 years ago there was nothing. No, no, 20 years ago, there was nothing here. In all this, there was nothing. A town that existed, Greytown had been lost during the war, [what is now] San Juan del Norte.

So there was no village here, there was no population, there was nothing. When Dona Violeta came to make this town here... Doña Violeta built 4 houses of palm, 4 huts… and it grew. There were no police here, no soldiers, no judge, no teacher, no health center.

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1 Greytown, Nicaragua was bombarded and destroyed by the US Navy on July 13, 1854 in response to damage of American property and attempts to levy taxes on ships using the Rio San Juan passageway when the town was a British protectorate.
2 San Juan del Norte is also known as San Juan de Nicaragua and is often still referred to as Greytown. These names are used interchangeably in the region and in this work.
Pastora emphasized how after the fighting of the war, there was nothing left of the town and plans to rebuild were slow to take shape. Throughout the 1980s, gruesome battles plagued the border region. The area and residents bore witness to extreme violence. Some border residents told stories of going to wash clothes in the river and stumbling upon dead bodies floating in the water. Others spoke in tears as they gave firsthand accounts of horrific injustices they witnessed against innocent fleeing civilians, including women and children. After the war, the border zone was barren. The village was burned to the ground and the people had fled, many to Costa Rica where some were given shelter and protected status. In 1987, with the introduction of Oscar Arias’ peace plan, an era of bloody warfare gave way to a period of complete abandonment and isolation in this eastern stretch of the border region.

As Pastora noted, an unsuccessful rebuilding initiative under President Violeta Chamorro (1990-1997) amounted to nothing more than the creation of a few thatch-roof huts. After her time in office, the area was still extremely marginalized and disenfranchised from the Nicaraguan state. When people slowly began to resettle in the region, on both sides of the border, there were no social services or semblance of a town in the nascent village of San Juan del Norte. As Pastora mentioned, there were no law enforcement agents nor criminal justice system. There were no schools, no teachers, and no health centers.

Pastora’s description of this situation exemplifies the marginal relationship the new pueblo had with the rest of Nicaragua. As the border region and the village of San Juan del Norte grew, the town and its residents built ties to Costa Rica. Resources from Costa Rica were more accessible and most likely more familiar as many people were returning from Costa Rica. They maintained and utilized cross-border kinship and social relations to access markets, goods, and services. Many border residents who had the means to do so crossed the border and made the
trek into Costa Rica towns to buy consumer goods. As a result, strong transborder ties developed connecting San Juan del Norte to Costa Rica. As Pastora explained:

_Esto era un municipio de Costa Rica. Se hablaba el Tico "si guevon, no guevon, que es la vara mae? Pura vida." Circulaba el colon...la cerveza, Imperial. Si quería fumarte un cigarro tenia que ser de Costa Rica. Tenia que pagar todo en colon. Había un teléfono celular que era con Costa Rica. Era un celular de Costa Rica. Los niños iban a la escuela de Costa Rica. La medicina venía de Costa Rica...todo era aquí de Costa Rica. La gente de aquí tenía su familia en la Barra de Colorado y en Limón. No tenían familiares en San Carlos ni en Bluefields._

_A las nicas los veían como extranjeros como extraños. Hace 10 años que yo vine aquí esa era la situación eso era la problemática. Esta era una provincia de Costa Rica. Entonces cuando empezaron los problemas, Dona Laura prohibió que nos vendieran gasolina. Entonces yo puse la gasolinera. Ordenó que no nos vendieran alimentos lo comprábamos en La Tigra...Prohibió que nos vendieran alimentos Dona Laura._

This was a municipality of Costa Rica. Costa Rican Spanish was spoken "si guevon, no guevon, que es la vara mae? Pura vida." The colon [Costa Rican currency] circulated... the beer [was] Imperial. If you wanted to smoke a cigarette it was from Costa Rica. You had to pay for everything in colones. There was a cell phone that was Costa Rican. It was a cell phone from Costa Rica. The children went to school in Costa Rica. The medicine came from Costa Rica ... everything here was from Costa Rica. The people here had their family in Barra de Colorado and in Limón [Costa Rican towns]. They had no relatives in San Carlos or Bluefields [both Nicaraguan towns].

The Nicaraguans were seen as strangers...as strangers! Ten years ago I came here [and] that was the situation. That was the problem. This was a province of Costa Rica. Then when the problems started, Dona Laura forbade that they sell us gas, so I put in a gas station. She ordered that we were not to be sold food in La Tigra [small village across the border in Costa Rica.] She forbade them to sell us food, Dona Laura.

This description provides an interesting account of San Juan del Norte before the conflict. First, it highlights the importance of cross-border trade for residents of San Juan del Norte. It also depicts the role that familial and social networks played in accessing goods and resources within Costa Rica in the years leading up to the border dispute. According to Pastora, social and kinship ties existed between San Juan del Norte and several Costa Rican towns, such as Barra del Colorado and Puerto Limon, not with towns in Nicaragua. The resources and services that the Nicaraguan government failed to provide were obtained either by crossing the border into Costa
Rica or through these social and economic ties to people in Costa Rica. Goods such as gasoline, cigarettes, food, and medicine came from Costa Rica and they were paid for in Costa Rican currency. Costa Rican infrastructure provided schools, communication, and healthcare. People living on the Nicaraguan side of the border also bought dry goods and animal feed from Costa Rican delivery trucks that regularly made the four-hour trek into the jungle to La Tigra, from which Nicaraguans would haul the cargo back to San Juan by boat. According to Pastora, even local speech reflected a linguistic preference to Costa Rican dialect. The words guevon, mae, and pura vida are easily identifiable Costa Rican slang phrases of native speakers.

Second, according to Pastora’s account, both nations apparently were aware of these vital cross-border ties. Pastora claimed it was Chinchilla who, after the start of the dispute, prohibited cross-border trade of Costa Rican goods to Nicaragua. This example shows how national-level politics can play out in the local context, affecting access to necessary resources and straining social relations. As one border resident of Costa Rican nationality expressed to me, this tore at the consciousness of some residents.

Y todo Tico que agarraron dándole, que se, un saco de arroz o ayuda a algún Nicaragüense, según Laura era declarado no grato para la patria, por ayudar a los hermanos aquí, a los vecinos.

And all the Ticos [Costa Ricans] they caught giving them, say, a sack of rice or help to a Nicaraguan, according to Laura they were declared an ingrate to the motherland, for helping the brothers here, their neighbors.

As this quote shows, there clearly existed deep cross-border ties that drew upon a common understanding of living and belonging to the border zone. These transborder ties among residents prioritized local necessity over political rhetoric and nationality that depicted the other as “the enemy.” Belonging to the border identity is based on the shared experiences of life in the border region and all it entails. These bonds are formed over many years of enduring hardships
such as floods, draught, hunger, poverty, and isolation that affect everyone. All of the shared experiences among residents (but especially the difficult ones that require depending on others for resources and information) form the basis of a border comradery between members that trumps nationality, the geographic border line, differences in migratory status, and linguistic and racial differences. As expressed above in statement by the Costa Rican from Delta, and consistent with observations in the region, extending help to a fellow border resident supersedes nationality, even during an international conflict, as both presidents effuse nationalistic rhetoric and urge loyalty to the state. Also of interest here is that the Costa Rican border resident referred to Nicaraguans as brothers and as neighbors—not by their nationality or the derogatory term Nica, which is often heard throughout Costa Rica. His use of the term ‘brother’ implies more than a comradery, evoking fictive kinship ties as part of transborder relations and a border identity.

The border identity, then, in Delta is not based on ethnicity, race, nationality, or other divisive factors. Rather, as depicted in Chapter 2, in the case of emergency medical attention, both Nicaraguans and Costa Ricans of the region rely on one another for access to basic necessities, resources, and even emergency distribution of aid in the event of extreme flooding or other crises. Knowing that they cannot rely on the state due to geographic isolation and marginalization, the ties of belonging to the transborder identity serve as a safety net in times of need. However, it must be mentioned that living in the border region alone does not qualify one to belong to this identity. Newcomers are viewed with suspicion and as outsiders. One must reside in the region for an extended amount of time and also participate in the local border economy to earn acceptance into this identity.
For example, another form of transborder ties that shape this identity are economic trade ties as practiced by local residents that continued even throughout the dispute, despite nationalistic calls from political leaders to halt exchange, specifically that of gasoline. The very existence of a well-established yet clandestine gas station selling diesel fuel and *mezcla* to both Nicaraguan and Costa Ricans from a farm on the Costa Rican side of the border speaks volumes about locals’ attitudes and loyalties to a nationality. In fact, both state and non-state actors of both countries participated in ‘illegal’ bartering of petroleum products that crossed the border. This type of trade was even carried out with community members in Delta with gasoline belonging to Costa Rican authorities. Gasoline is one of the most valuable commodities in the border region. Not only is it extremely important for transportation, but it is used to secure food when fishing and some houses use it to run generators for temporary electricity. It is also very hard to come by, so it can be traded easily and for almost any other good. The clandestine gas station observed in 2011 did not exist when I returned in 2015. It is unclear if its disappearance can be attributed to Costa Rican police patrols along the border or to the installation of a new gas station that Pastora mentioned he procured in San Juan del Norte. Regardless, this type of economic activity represents the forms of transborder trade established by local residents before and during the border dispute to fulfill basic needs in areas where the Costa Rican and Nicaraguan states failed.
Figure 14. A clandestine border gasoline station located on a Costa Rican farm in the border region (2011). The goods were stored in a wooden structure protected from view of passing boats through the use of plastic tarps. A Nicaraguan family, who are longtime residents in Costa Rica, ran the cross-border operation.

Economic isolation from both states is not the only factor that contributed to the transnationality of the border and why the region was referred to as “tierra de nadie.” Other dynamics distinctive to the border are also essential to understanding the events leading up to and during the border conflict. The transborder economy Pastora described developed due to the lack of a Nicaraguan state presence and failure to invest in border security and local economies such as San Juan del Norte. Although residents of San Juan del Norte had access to limited goods and services via Costa Rica, the border region was considered a no-man’s land because neither
government had authorities (military or law enforcement personnel) stationed there for security purposes.

Y en esos tres kilómetros de suampos era tierra de nadie. Y cuando yo digo que era tierra de nadie es porque no entraban ni autoridades ticas ni autoridades nicas. Y eso lo aprovecharon los narcotraficantes para hacer una base. Y cuando aquí se incorporó esta zona al resto de Nicaragua porque estaba abandonada, toda esta zona, y el narcotráfico hacia lo que quería [20:53]

Y empezó a venir la policía y empezó a venir el ejército y empezó venir los tribunales civiles y la educación y ministerio de educación y el ministerio de salud y se fue incorporando esto al resto de Nicaragua el ejército descubre que en esa zona de Harbor Head todo eso era un territorio de los narcos.

Y cuando empiecen a venir las autoridades empiezan a combatir el narcotráfico. Y esa zona que era de...la de, como se llama, la de Reyes. Que Costa Rica le dio asilo como una gran persona y que después lo tuvo que capturar y lo tienen preso por narcotraficante.... Era el que controlaba esa zona, esa era tierra de nadie. ¿Quién vivía aquí? ¿O que policía se iba a meter? Si cuando vinieron los ticos al siguiente día alzaron vuelo y hasta la bandera la dejaron. Yo la tuve que guardar la bandera tica.” [1:08:14]

And in those three kilometers of swamp, it was a no man’s land. And when I say that it was a no man’s land, it was because no authorities entered, not Costa Rican or Nicaraguan. And the drug traffickers took advantage of that to make a base. And when this zone was incorporated to the rest of Nicaragua, because all this area was abandoned, the drug trade did what it wanted. [20:53]

And the police began to come, and the army began to come, and the civil courts came. And education, the ministry of education, the ministry of health etc. And as it was incorporating into the rest of Nicaragua the army discovered that in Harbor Head (the conflicted territory), that it all was a territory of drug traffickers.

And when the authorities began coming, they started to fight drug trafficking. And that area that was...that was, what’s his name? That belonged to Reyes, the one Costa Rica gave asylum to as if he were a great person and then had to capture him later and have him arrested as a drug trafficker.... He was the one that controlled that area. It was a no man's land. Who lived there? Or what police were going to go in there? When the Ticos came, the next day they ran away and even abandoned their flag! I had to go in and save the Costa Rican flag. [1:08:14]

According to Pastora, it was a no-man’s land not only because it lacked Nicaraguan commodities, but also because it lacked the absence of law or order. Central to his narrative, the border region existed outside the boundaries of both states. The lack of a state presence created a
vacuum, in which unclaimed territory was then claimed by non-state actors. The territory did in fact belong to someone, as Pastora explained; it was “territorio de los narcos.”

Referencing the three kilometers of disputed territory, Pastora explained how the lack of security led to the region being overrun by narcotraffickers. The narco base that he mentioned in this excerpt is a farm known as Finca Aragón, located near the mouth of the Rio San Juan. This farm comprised a portion of the disputed territory and was occupied by Sandinista forces for several years during the beginning of the dispute. The land belonged to an infamous drug kingpin, Augustin Reyes Aragon (alias Tarzan or Hombre Mono), who is currently serving out a twelve-year sentence in San Sebastian prison in San Jose, Costa Rica. He allegedly was running an international drug trafficking operation on the property, moving cocaine and contraband north from Colombia in go-fast boats. According to Insight Crime, a non-profit research institute focusing on organized crime in Latin America, Reyes along with his six brothers run the narco group called the Tarzanes or Los Tarzanes.³ After fleeing Finca Aragon in 2010 and going into hiding, Reyes was later arrested in July of 2014 and found guilty of trafficking 700 kilos of cocaine in Puerto Limon, Costa Rica. After the onset of the conflict, his family fled Nicaragua and relocated to Delta, the Costa Rican side, where they reside on the periphery on the village limits. Some members of this family function as part of the community and interact daily with other local residents.

Upon arriving at Delta, I had read about the farm in the news. However, it was not until I spent time in the border region that I began to hear stories about Reyes and his family. It was usually over a bottle of cacique or during a party that I would catch bits and pieces of conversations. Slowly, I began to realize that the woman who often cooked breakfast for me

³ http://www.insightcrime.org/nicaragua-organized-crime-news/tarzanes
was Reyes’ sister. After inquiring one day at school, I learned that the new student we had welcomed was Reyes’ nephew. Over time, I became aware that nearly the entire extended Reyes family had left the farm and their houses and businesses in San Juan del Norte, Nicaragua and settled on a plot of land on the edge of the village.

I learned about Reyes without having to ask. I was told that go-fast boats would be brought into Finca Aragon, hidden and guarded by armed men in the swamps, and then restocked and refueled before heading north. In the meantime, the traffickers would be brought into the town of San Juan del Norte to eat, relax, have relations with women, and party before mounting the boats 24-48 hours later to continue on their route north. Since San Juan del Norte is the nearest village to Finca Aragon, it became a narco-trafficking hub. It was an important and strategic stopover on the drug route north. According to locals, the village was fueled by drug money and it was the scene of lavish narco fiestas.

Figure 15. A defunct narcobar in San Juan del Norte, Nicaragua (2011)
Much like the nearby Costa Rican coastal town of Barra del Colorado, people in San Juan del Norte also spent time monitoring the beaches and waters in search of drugs that had been dumped overboard when the go-fast boats were under pursuit by authorities. In 2011, it was explained to me that the beaches in San Juan del Norte belonged to different trafficking groups who controlled their respective tracts of beach with armed patrols, rendering the beaches a dangerous place for locals and foreigners alike. Others explained that in the village, it was no secret who had found abandoned sacks of drugs on the beaches or in the water because it was the only financial stimulus large enough for starting a small business. So while residents of San Juan del Norte did rely heavily on transborder trade to purchase Costa Rican goods, the influx of money that was used to obtain these goods often came from the drug trade. For example, much of the drug money was used to purchase and bring in expensive goods such as television sets, sound systems, refrigerators, and other appliances. They were typically brought in from the Costa Rican city of Guapiles by land, then hauled downstream by boat to San Juan del Norte. Some border residents recall the narco heyday that existed from the late 1990s through the 2000s. They spoke of the parties during semana santa (Holy Week) and how the people of San Juan del Norte gathered around local kingpins as speedboats whizzed by in the waterways. One person referred to this period of heavy drug trafficking as “el original San Juan.” That being said, I never witnessed these parties. The residents’ stories predate my arrival in the region. The stories, however, are significant because this reality remains a part of the collective memory of the town and contributes to the still very lax view many locals hold about drug trafficking activities. According to residents, Las Tarzanas was not the only family in the region involved in the drug trade. There was, allegedly, another large cartel active during the same period and
several others operating in the surrounding areas ranging from Bluefields, Nicaragua down to Tortuguero, Costa Rica.

The lack of any state presence, as Pastora explained allowed for the unregulated proliferation of narcotics trafficking in the region. The cartels had free range to smuggle drugs and other contraband north. The isolation, combined with the nearly impenetrable jungle environment, made the region extremely favorable for drug trafficking because the terrain is difficult for security forces to access and patrol. There are no roads beyond Delta and the Costa Rican _Fuerza Publica_ cannot legally navigate the San Juan River. Therefore, the only way for Costa Rican forces to access the territory is on foot through thick, swampy jungle. Costa Rican police now utilize this route on a routine basis to surveil the region, an activity that was nonexistent prior to 2010.

During the interview, Pastora chuckled as he recounted how abandoned the region was and how the Costa Rican police could not endure the harsh border environment—a place that for him was second nature, due to his many years fighting and living in the region. In a sly jab typical of Pastora’s personality, he depicted himself as heroically having to go in and retrieve the Costa Rican flag that the police left behind when they cowardly fled. At this point, there was a shift in his narrative, and Pastora began to portray himself as the sole savior of lawfulness in the border region, especially of San Juan del Norte.

_Entonces aquí era una población paupérrima. Vivía de la pesca, de la caza y de la droga. Y el cliente que tenía aquí la droga era la patrullera de Costa Rica. En alta mar se las compraba. No había orden, no había ley, no había dios, no había patria, no había nada. Esto era un pueblo sin ley, sin dios, sin patria…. No había aeropuerto, no había nada, no había trabajo...hace 10 años aquí era la tierra de nadie. [1:07:35]

So it was a destitute population here. The people lived from fishing, hunting and drugs. And the best drug client here was the Costa Rican patrol. They bought the drugs at sea. There was no order. There was no law. There was no god. There was no country. There was nothing. This was a town without law, without god, without patriotism...
no airport. There was nothing. There was no work.... Ten years ago it was no man's land here. [1:07:35]

Pastora stressed how bad the conditions were in San Juan del Norte before he arrived. People fished and hunted, and they also fished and hunted for drugs. Poverty was rampant and there was no work. He described San Juan as having no patriotism, no faith, no direction, and no future. His description of the old San Juan is a crucial part of his narrative of the border dispute because it allows him to be both the hero and savior. According to him, his involvement in the border affairs is justified. Again, his narrative purports his successes in cleaning up and saving San Juan. He creditd himself for the rejuvenation of the Caribbean community, creating jobs with the dredging project and restoring law and order with a military presence. A case in point of his strongman approach can be seen in an interaction with a general store owner upon returning to San Juan del Norte. As he described:

_Y yo vine y empecé poco a poco... me veían como extranjero. No me querían recibir la moneda el córdoba para pagar una gaseosa un refresco comprado en Costa Rica. Al extremo fue una vez a un pulpero, el pulpero ese que.... Marcos, que es sandinista, sí. Cuando yo le quiero pagar con monedas él me dice no que eso aquí no vale. ¿Como que no vale le digo? Estamos en Nicaragua. O me lo recibí o te echo preso. Y se quedó...te voy echar al preso...eso hace diez años. Sí, de verdad. [1:07:27]_

And I came and started little by little. They saw me as a foreigner. They did not want to receive the [Nicaraguan] currency, the córdoba, to pay for a soda, a refreshment bought in from Costa Rica. To the extent that, once a general store owner, that one... Marcos, who is a Sandinista, yes. When I wanted to pay him with [Nicaraguan] coins he tells me No, that it's not worth anything here. I said to him, how can it be worth nothing? We are in Nicaragua. You take it, or I'll put you in jail. And he agreed... I'll throw you in jail [I said]. That was ten years ago. Yes, indeed. [1:07:27]

Pastora was, perhaps, not incorrect in recognizing his role in the drastic changes in San Juan. In many ways, he is directly responsible for the dispute and recent developments. What becomes interesting is how these changes relate to the border dispute itself, the resulting and extremely costly court case at the International Court of Justice (ICJ), and even the 2011
Nicaraguan national elections. As a form of propaganda to drum up nationalistic fervor, the border dispute on the nationally symbolic San Juan River was a perfect strategy. The concocted conflict paved the way for Pastora to establish a strong Sandinista presence in the region, a characteristic of the town which continues today as he forges forward with development plans in the town and region.

The morning following our interview, Pastora took me on a personal tour of Greytown and the surrounding area in his private boat before he departed for Managua in his private plane. He explained the cultural and historical heritage of the region in impressive detail, pointing to and reading aloud from illustrations hanging on the walls of the airport that he commissioned. At a military bodega by his home in front of a life-size map, he proudly explained his interpretation of where the boundary line is and his plans for future infrastructure. He pointed to the map and described plans for the Nicaraguan side of the border which (in addition to the new airport) include a marina for millionaires and their yachts, fancy eco-hotels, and other investments in the tourism sector.

That same day, he also had his son show me other projects they are carrying out in the town. He took me to a large nursery that is part of a reforestation initiative that will provide jobs and better the community. We walked past an old hotel that had been converted into a police station and living quarters. For Pastora, his description of San Juan del Norte as a lawless narco haven is a distant memory of the past. As a military figure and government leader in a position of power, his narrative gains legitimacy as a piece of Nicaraguan history with each iteration. Of course, he does not speak for or represent all Nicaraguans. I do not intend to make that claim.

However, his story carries substantive political weight that is further reified by a strong (real or
imagined) political following. He speaks from a position of power with a particular ownership of the region and his narrative thus serves as an authoritative voice on the subject.

*Figure 16.* One month before The Hague ruled on the border dispute, Comandante Edén Pastora explained his understanding of the boundary line and government plans for local infrastructure and tourism development.

San Juan del Norte, Nicaragua (2015)

When I asked him how the situation on the farm escalated to the massive scale of an international dispute, he simply explained:

*Entonces decide perseguir al jefe de esos narcos. Huye para Costa Rica... y llega alla a Costa Rica diciendo que Nicaragua se había metido a Costa Rica. [21:33] El tiempo que el gobierno de Nicaragua me manda a limpiar el rio...*

*Entonces Dona Laura Chinchilla hace el escándalo y en vez de platicarlas como nosotros el problema porque se metieron a esta zona y sacaron los laudos y sacar y tratar el Canas Juárez y discutirlo entre nosotros entre hermano. Dona Laura nos acusa de invasión, se va a Argentina a México a todos partes del mundo. A Europa hablar mal del gobierno de Nicaragua. A decir que nosotros somos invasores y nos llama nuevos corsarios y nos llama calificativos, barbaros, vándalos y nosotros no la contestamos. [22:59]*

*Bueno, están así las cosas. Estamos esperando el fallo de la corte internacional y haber que dice la corte. Los que diga la corte nosotros aceptamos, aunque salgamos muy mal. [28:40]*
So I decided to pursue the head of these narcos. He fled to Costa Rica...and when he got to Costa Rica he was saying that Nicaragua [the military] had entered Costa Rica. At that same time, the government of Nicaragua sends me to clean up the river.

Then Dona Laura Chinchilla makes the scandal and instead of discussing it with us, the problem of why they went into that area and [instead] of taking out the agreements and the Canas Juárez treaty to discuss it between us, as brothers...Dona Laura accuses us of invasion. She goes to Argentina, to Mexico, to all parts of the world. Europe, to speak ill of the Nicaraguan government. To say that we are invaders and calls us new corsairs and calls us epithets, barbarians, vandals. But we do not answer. [22:59]

Well, that’s the way it is. We are waiting for the ruling of the international court to see what the court says. Whatever the court says, we will accept, even if it ends up very bad. [28:40]

According to Pastora, he decided to go after the head of the drug operation to clean up San Juan del Norte. Implying a passive position, he simply was fulfilling his charge as Minister of Development. In his opinion, what amounted to a huge international border dispute that lasted for five years and broke down Costa Rica-Nicaragua relations for an indeterminable period of time was in its entirety Laura Chinchilla’s fault. According to Pastora, instead of sitting down and talking it through, the Costa Rican government blew it out of proportion and created an international scandal. He clearly stated his disapproval of how president of Costa Rica Laura Chinchilla handled the situation, inferring that the dispute could have been settled by simply sitting down to talk. Presenting himself as always having been open to dialogue, he denounced Laura Chinchilla as the aggressor, while he passively removed himself from the equation. A review of the events suggests otherwise.

Considering his narrative, it is best to think of Pastora’s arrival at the border region, the cleaning up of the drug scene, the border dispute, and the revitalization of San Juan as one interconnected event. Very interestingly, by including these other dynamics into his story of the border dispute, he was able to convert what Costa Rica referred to as a military invasion into a heroic propaganda account in which he was the protagonist. His narrative serves three main
points. First, it provides a justification for the invasion, namely to defeat Augustin Reyes and drug trafficking writ large. Second, it asserts blame by portraying a false commitment to dialogue. Third, it highlights his actions as successes by bringing development projects to the border region in a show of his loyalty to the people and larger good of Nicaragua.

**President Luis Guillermo Solís (2014-2018), a Costa Rican Narrative**

The aggravated political relationship that characterized the border conflict between Pastora and Chinchilla gave way to a different dynamic as Luis Guillermo Solís came to power in 2014. At this time, the border dispute was being heard at the ICJ and, as such, Solís was tasked with responding in a legal fashion. Whereas Chinchilla’s response was more immediate, alarming, and reactionary via strategic security initiatives on the border, Solís’ handling of the dispute was more pragmatic and rooted in a historical understanding.

During Solís’ time in office, there was still activity on the border. The Sandinistas continued dredging on the San Juan River and the Costa Rican National Police were still stationed at Delta, conducting surveillance missions. However, news reports of the border dispute were less frequent and nationalistic rhetoric and public interest had somewhat declined.

Aside from the notable shifts in the Costa Rican national political sphere over the course of the five-year dispute, Solís’ point of view was markedly different in part due to his professional background. Solís came to politics from academia, where he was a full professor of history and political science at the University of Costa Rica. He has had an accomplished research and teaching career focused on Central American politics and peace negotiations and has published on regional border policy.

I never anticipated having the opportunity to speak with the president of Costa Rica about the border dispute with Nicaragua. It happened by chance in a serendipitous moment one day
during field work in Delta. My key informant mentioned that the Costa Rican leader would be visiting the nearby village of Jerusalén, Sarapiqui. That particular village had recently been inundated by heavy river flooding and an event was being held to address the disaster and the government’s response. The secretary of the local *junta de desarollo* in Delta viewed it as a good opportunity to press for repairs to the *trocha*, Chinchilla’s land route to Delta (discussed in the previous chapter). The local Development Association also wanted to attend to support the work of a newly organized activist group in the region called *La Milla Fronteriza*, or The Border Mile. Their aims were to advocate collectively against rumored government-forced evictions in the border region due to residents’ lack of permanent land titles. We decided to take my car, split the cost of gas, and attend the event. Some of the men in the *junta* traveled to the event by motorcycle and met us there. I helped the association draft up letters regarding their road concerns and, using the school printer, we made a few copies before trekking down the dreaded jungle road to Jerusalén on August 1, 2015.

Since it took over two hours to drive the roughly 30 kilometers, the event had already started when we arrived. There were surprisingly few people in attendance, considering the president was scheduled to speak. We made our way into the hot, sticky pavilion and stood by several other members of the *junta* and neighbors from nearby villages. The secretary of the *junta* passed around the letters for people to sign as we listened to different representatives speak about climate change, reforestation projects, and emergency response preparedness. After a while, Flaca noticed one of the *junta* members casually talking to a member of the President’s staff. She abruptly said “*vamos*” and took off, slithering her tiny body through the crowd. I, of course, followed. She presented the letters to whom we soon learned was the president’s assistant and then she introduced me. I explained who I was and that I wanted to interview the president
about his views on the conflict. He said that it could be arranged and we exchanged contact numbers. Still intent on at least introducing myself to President Solís, we hung around until the event was over. He ultimately agreed to an interview at a later date at the *casa presidencial*. I owed Flaca big time.

*Figure 17. President Solís (second from left) and other officials addressing the community of Jerusalén, Sarapiquí, Costa Rica after a devastating flood. (August 01, 2015)*

**If Calero Goes, It All Goes**

When I arrived at the *casa presidencial* several weeks later, I was welcomed by the president and his staff. His account of the border dispute was rooted in a deep appreciation of the history and legality of the border. His approach was measured and quite different from the bombastic account provided by Pastora, even though both interviews were conducted within the final few months of the dispute. I first inquired about how two countries could be fighting over a
small patch of swampland, especially considering there were signed historical treaties specifically dealing with the issue of demarcation in this portion of the border. Solís responded in English:

I think you’re right in trying to look into the history of the region, because it all springs from that in many ways. I mean, Calero is not Calero, it’s the whole border. What happens there can replicate elsewhere if we do not take care of it very carefully. The border between Costa Rica and Nicaragua is the heir of a geopolitical struggle of the 19th century between the United States and Britain. And it is almost unexplainable without taking into consideration that factor.

The Costa Rica-Nicaragua border, and in particular the portion defined by the San Juan River, has been rife with conflict in various forms since the creation of independent nation states in Central America in the mid-nineteenth century. Ranging from the Spanish (and later British) periods of colonization, to early twentieth-century disputes over river navigation rights, and the role of the border as a hotbed during the Sandinista Revolution and subsequent Contra War in Nicaragua, the theme of conflict is no stranger to this corner of the world. In many ways, the current border dispute is simply another chapter in the writing of a borderland history characterized by political power struggles and clashing economic, cultural, and political systems.

The San Juan River has played a pivotal role in both Nicaraguan and global history from the beginning of the European conquest until present. Canvassed early on as a potential transoceanic passage to the Pacific, the San Juan River and its promise drew centuries of bloody conflict, hellacious controversy, and fetid corruption—a factor still very much relevant today. The convenience of the natural geography, beauty, natural resources, and unthinkable power that controlling this terrain could unlock has lured pirates, industrialists, missionaries, gold fanatics, travel writers, thrill-seekers, and heads of state to endure torturous terrain, extreme climate, and tropical disease in the name of profit, progress, and power.
**Discovery and the Colonial Period**

In 1502, on his fourth and final voyage, Cristopher Columbus graced the shorelines of San Juan del Norte. His mission was to find the coveted strait between the seas. Ultimately, he overlooked the San Juan River route, hence bypassing the channel that could deliver him closest, although not entirely, to his goal. According to Rabella (2004) at that time, near the turn of the sixteenth century, some three thousand inhabitants lived in the entirety of the Rio San Juan basin, stretching from the Lake of Nicaragua down to the Caribbean Sea. He reported that all are of Chibcha origin; however, they belong to different tribes such as the Guatusos, Botos, Melchoras, Suerrses, Guetared, Talamancas, and Rama.

It was not until later, in the 1520s, after the cities of Granada and Leon were established, that unsuccessful expeditions began in the opposite direction—that is, from the Lake of Nicaragua outward toward the Caribbean Sea via the desaguadero, or drainage canal of the great lake. This path down the San Juan was notoriously treacherous, involving fierce rapids, dangerous rocks, and often deadly encounters with the indigenous peoples of the area.

In April of 1539, Captain Alonso Calero and Diego Machuca de Zuazo departed from Granada with “abundant supplies, forty horses, and fifty hogs…accompanied by several priests, more than a hundred Spanish soldiers and a force of Indian servants” (Fernandez Guardia 1913, 118). Although they initially were well-equipped, as the months drew on, starvation, dehydration, and sickness set in. During their voyage down the San Juan River, Calero and Machuca decided to split up. Machuca headed north with troops on the Yari River while Calero maintained the voyage on the San Juan. Calero most likely reached the Caribbean Sea in July of

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4 For the full description of this exploration, see Costa-Rica, Nicaragua y Panamá en el siglo XVI; su historia y sus límites según los documentos del Archivo de Indias de Sevilla, del de Simancas, etc. Recogidos y publicados con notas y aclaraciones históricas y geográficas, by D. Manuel M. de Peralta.
1539. Told by Indian captives that it was another lake like that of the north, it was not until he saw a seafaring vessel in the distance that he was certain of his location. From there, he explored north along the Atlantic coast of Nicaragua. Exhausted and depleted, he ultimately opted to sail south to a known Panamanian port instead of attempting the upstream return on the San Juan to Granada. In November of 1539, he and only eight of his men landed in Nombre de Dios, Panama.

*Figure 18. Itinerary of Alonso Calero*

Calero, however, sought refuge in the wrong locale. The President of the *Audiencia de Panamá*, Dr. Don Francisco Pérez de Robles, was preparing the expedition of son-in-law, Hernán Sánchez de Badajoz, to lay claim to the same San Juan River region. Instead of helping
Calero, he had him jailed on false pretenses by royal decree. Sanchez de Badajoz subsequently built a small fort where the river meets the sea by the name of San Juan de la Cruz—thus, the supposed origin of the name San Juan del Norte (Rabella 1995). The Governor of Nicaragua Rodrigo Contreras later regained control of the strategic outpost.

More importantly, in the following years, the Rio San Juan began to function as a major commercial route providing access to the Spanish colonial gem, the city of Granada, one of the most important commercial hubs in Central America at the time. Trade destined for Spanish colonial ports was transported via the San Juan River. Nicaragua exported products such as indigo, tallow, chickens, corn, cocoa, cotton, hides, gold, cochineal, brazil wood, turpentine, tobacco, and sugar via this waterway (Rabella 1995).

With the movement of such valuable goods and the rise of piracy in the West Indies came the need for increased protection along the river. In response to numerous pirate attacks, most famously a lucrative siege on Granada by Captain Henry Morgan in 1665, the Spanish constructed the massive Fortaleza Inmaculada Concepción at El Castillo in 1675 on the banks of the San Juan. (The structure still stands today, about 60 miles upstream from Delta, Costa Rica and is known simply as El Castillo or El Castillo Viejo.)

Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Rio San Juan region gave way to further and more intense battles. The British, via Jamaica, had secured strongholds along the Caribbean coast in Central America and their alliances with generations of Miskito kings (Olien 1983) led to the Miskito kingdom becoming a protectorate of the British crown. In the global context of the Spanish-Anglo War, British governor and commander-in-chief of Jamaica William Lyttelton set aim on capturing Granada via the San Juan River. The joint British and Miskito forces of two thousand men and more than fifty boats launched an attack on roughly one hundred
Spanish defenders at the *Fortaleza Inmaculada Concepción* in 1762 (Dolores in Cardenal 1993). In a turn of events that produced a national hero and beloved idol, a nineteen-year-old woman named Rafaela Herrera rallied the Spanish troops and led them in a victorious battle against the British after her father, Don Pedro Herrera, Commander of the fort, passed away from illness. Her achievements, however, were short-lived as subsequent attacks led to the capture and brief occupation of the famous fort in 1780, again by the British under the command of John Polson and Captain Horatio Nelson. Ultimately, disease and lack of supplies forced their return to Jamaica, but these historic battles are representative of the volatile and hostile atmosphere along the Rio San Juan throughout the eighteenth century (Cardenal 1993, 23-26).

The growing importance of the water route drew foreign surveyors, such as the French, as early as 1735. However, all of the colonial powers were diligently exploring and battling for control of the best route across the isthmus. The British, by way of Jamaica, planned better and more effective attacks on Spanish colonies. Collaborating with the Miskitos and Zambos of Nicaragua’s Atlantic coast (with whom they had long established trade outposts), they made incursions inland and up the San Juan River throughout the 1700s. During a battle in 1780, the British briefly seized Spain’s most prized fort, El Castillo, situated on the San Juan River.

In 1796, San Juan del Norte was declared a Spanish colonial port for both Nicaragua and Costa Rica (Gongora 1983). Trade from Costa Rica began flowing down the Rio San Juan shortly thereafter. The town remained under jurisdiction of the Central American Federation of States until 1838 when the union dissolved. After that point in time, San Juan del Norte remained a part of Nicaraguan territory. The task of international border demarcation in the region was very much an unfinished project of the young Central American nation states during the era of state formation.
As early as 1858, in an attempt to establish the border limits, Máximo Jerez of Nicaragua and José María Cañas of Costa Rica signed the Cañas-Jerez treaty fixing the border along the southern bank of the San Juan River. Later, the lure of a trans-isthmian canal route utilizing the Rio San Juan led to repeated intervention from foreign interests, including the United States, Great Britain, and France. At the request of both countries, in 1888 Grover Cleveland arbitrated the border limitations and upheld the 1858 treaty. The resulting Cleveland Award and 1897 mapping by E.P. Alexander of the international boundary line comprise the documents at the heart of the dispute today. The interpretation of these treaties, as well as other accords reached between Costa Rica and Nicaragua, provide the basis for legal claims to the territory within the contemporary context.

Figure 19. E.P. Alexander’s 1897 depiction of the eastern-most section of the Costa Rica-Nicaragua border. This early survey corresponds to the exact territory under dispute at the International Court of Justice from 2010-2015
These treaties, however, have been interpreted in various ways to produce different territorial results. Even though official maps published by both countries agreed on a common border, Solís pointedly recognized that border demarcation remains a “sensitive issue for both countries.”

Even when we speak with the Nicaraguan diplomats they do not accept that the San Juan River is a border river. They call it a Nicaraguan river with the margin of the river on the south side being Costa Rica. But Costa Rica ends at the beginning of the water. So each drop of the water of the river is Nicaraguan territory so they say this is not a frontier river, ok, this is a Nicaraguan river. And they make the point.

Very interestingly, one of the most peculiar characteristics of the aquatic border, as he explained, is that the boundary line is not in the middle of the river. The customary practice in the case of border rivers is to split the jurisdiction of the river in the middle of the stream. However, in this case, the boundary line follows the right margin or southern bank of the Rio San Juan. In other words, all of the waters of the river belong to Nicaragua. Costa Rican territory ends where the southern bank of the river meets the water. This facet of the border limit was established in the 1858 Treaty of Cañas-Jerez and reinforced in the arbitration by President Grover Cleveland in 1888. In 1916, when questions arose over Costa Rica’s right to navigate the river, the Central American Court of Justice interpreted the treaty ruling in favor of Costa Rican navigation rights, however only as it pertains to articles of trade. It also includes language prohibiting the movement of police and arms. Despite efforts to clarify the early intentions of these treaties and depictions, the controversy still remains.

Solís’ attention to the unique aquatic dynamic of the border is significant because, as mentioned in Chapter 1, a major component of the border dispute is the dredging project initiated by Pastora, as an agent of the Nicaraguan state in October of 2010. Apart from the excavation of sediment from the riverbed, the dredging project also involved cutting channels through land to
divert the flow of the river in an effort to change where the mouth of the river meets the Caribbean Sea.

**Figure 20.** Tilling of trees and creation of artificial channel to divert flow of the San Juan River (Photo credits: Costa Rican Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores y Culto, Truth Document, Nov. 2010)

The act of cutting artificial channels thus has very real and severe implications. Essentially, control of the water becomes control over the limits of the boundary line. In this scenario, if the water moves, the boundary also moves. In this case, Nicaragua would gain possession of Costa Rica territory by shifting the mouth of the river. As Solís explained:

Since the river is theirs, if they were successful in what they were pursuing, which was to cut Isla Calero and just push it to the sea because basically what they were aiming at was the breaking apart of the *punta*, their border would have moved south, significantly. Because they are the owners of the whole river. So, if the island goes away or breaks apart as a result of the river delta opening up and engulfing the point of our territory then we lose not only Calero, but the whole border treaty is put into question. And that’s why it’s so important for us. [10:00]

For President Solís, there is more at stake than the small patch of swamp land. According to him, if Nicaragua were to successfully win sovereignty over the disputed territory, in essence
defeating what is set forth in established border treaties, it could open up a vantage point to call into question other portions of the border as well. The potential movement of the international boundary line would also have ramifications for maritime border delimitations. Solís explained that the vectors which determine maritime boundaries begin where the land (or river) boundary lines meet the sea. From there, they typically follow the same trajectory out into the ocean, forming national maritime boundaries. In other words, large stretches of maritime territory could change if the international land boundary shifts only a small bit in favor of Nicaragua. When asked to clarify how Nicaragua could possibly challenge something as presumably definite as an entire international border and what parts of the border were at risk, he replied:

The land part. You know that the borders are marked using what we call *jitos* in Spanish or *majones*. These are small structures that have like a metal part with the geodesic coordinates of where they are. These *majones* are mobile. Generally because in the case of rivers we can’t use them. In the case of the sea, they are useless. In the case of land they are…if the land is swampy, then they flood and they fall. Some people take them away, for souvenirs or simply to be able to move about easily with cattle or whatever. Or they fall with time. And there are areas in the center part of the border where the *majones* have disappeared. And because of the way in which the border was marked by the last engineers sent by President Hoover to measure the border, there has been some questioning as to the measures of Coronel Alexander—which I consider to be very precise. They didn’t have GPS at the time.

And so Nicaragua sometimes questions that. And in a couple of occasions we have found that it is indeed true that what we consider to be Costa Rican territory was actually Nicaraguan territory according to the Alexander measures. And we have released that territory in favor of Nicaragua. This has given Nicaragua arguments to insist in the fact that there are other problems with that line, which probably exist, in favor of Nicaragua or in favor of Costa Rica. But we have to be very careful. At this point we are not ready to take over that part of the border as a binational project. Because this has to be done by both countries at the same time. To work on redefining the line. So if Calero goes, then everything else can be put into question by Nicaragua. [13:36]

President Solís’ points regarding border demarcation are illuminating for several reasons. First, the acknowledgment that the border markers are unreliable, potentially incorrect, or in some cases simply nonexistent introduces a notion of uncertainty and instability to the border
imaginary, which typically conjures notions of firmness, exactness, and a fixed international boundary line. The border reality of Costa Rica and Nicaragua takes us beyond popular connotations of definition, precision, absoluteness, and authority typically associated with international borders, regardless of where they exist in the world.

Further, Solís’ candid description of the state of the borderline connects the dynamics of the contemporary conflict to the history of the two nations, shedding light on the longevity and binational nature of this issue. The border was never fully defined and agreed upon. Both countries seemingly recognize this and the reality that as two neighboring nations, they really ought to sit down and demarcate the exact dimensions of their shared frontier. Interestingly, Solís’ perspective presents a stark comparison to Pastora’s narrative, in which he stands in front of a life-size map confidently tracing the limits of Nicaragua.

It is also noteworthy how Solís mentioned that there was in fact a time when Costa Rica relinquished mistaken territory to Nicaragua. This happened without the eruption of a political conflict and a lengthy, expensive hearing at the ICJ. This example highlights the importance of international relations, particularly between neighboring countries regarding border demarcation, arbitration, and related border policies. It also serves as proof of the functionality, if not strength, of Costa Rica-Nicaragua relations prior to 2010. If previously, Costa Rica and Nicaragua could amicably resolve a misunderstanding over the exact boundary line, why could they not do so now? The subsequent deterioration of relations between the two countries during the more than five-year conflict highlights the deep political consequences related to the Isla Calero conflict. It also begs the question: What is different about the Isla Calero conflict? Is there somehow more at stake? According to Solís, it is the rest of the border.
Solís continued on to discuss implications for the western trajectory of the Costa Rica-Nicaragua border. There also exists a disagreement between the two nations regarding the central point of Bahia Salinas, a bay in the Guanacaste region of Costa Rica that is being developed into a highly profitable tourist area with upscale hotels and resorts. Solís said that Nicaragua argues that “el centro geográfico” of the Bay of Salinas is 300 meters south of where Costa Rica considers it to be. While using a GPS to simply find the center of the bay seems to be a viable solution, he acknowledged that it is not so simple.

Depending on where the final point is put, the vectors...that mark the waters of each country and the Pacific change. If the Nicaraguan measure is granted we lose 50,000 square kilometers of territorial sea. Which is 1% of the 500,000 which we have because of Cocos Island. But it so happens that 50,000 square kilometers in sea is the same size as Costa Rica on land. And moreover, it is there where most of the blue fin tuna, the yellow fin tuna of the Costa Rican Pacific grow. So the economic value of that is huge.

So in putting in question 300 hectares of swampy lands, what happens is the whole border is put to question and in the long run we can have a very, very serious problem. So we cannot be timid in dealing with that issue, unless we want to create a significant diplomatic problem later on. So it’s not machismo or lack of understanding of the international circumstance and lack of understanding of our obligations with the population of Costa Rica and Nicaragua alongside the border. But it is a serious question of territorial control in the long run.

As I listened, it became more evident that from the perspective of the Costa Rican president, the dispute over Isla Calero was much larger than the measly swamp I was familiar with in the far northeast corner of the country. From the questionable majones dividing the land portion of the border, to large-scale tourism, maritime territory, and natural resources such as marine life and other biodiversity, for President Solís there was much more riding on the ruling of the ICJ. It was a question of national interest and preservation of territorial sovereignty both now and, perhaps more importantly, in the future. It was an issue of territorial control.
The (Non)-Role of Narcotrafico in the Dispute

Upon learning about the unfinished nature of the border demarcation project and discussing why Isla Calero was so important to Costa Rica, I asked President Solís to share his opinions on the role of drug trafficking in the region. I specifically inquired about Augustín Reyes and Finca Aragon, the story that Edén Pastora uses to justify his incursion into Costa Rican territory. I was surprised to hear from the Costa Rican president how this was not the case. Contrary to Pastora’s account, Solís claimed:

At no single time, that I have knowledge about, of the conflict, did the Nicaraguan authorities claim that this was a drug related operation, officially, never. The interpretation that they gave as to the claim of Nicaragua for Calero to be Nicaraguan territory was based upon the interpretation of the treaty and of the ending part of the border in the Caribbean. And this was Pastora’s line [all] along the way. No time, that I know of, at the time of the conflict, when the conflict began, or later had the Nicaraguan government conveyed to Costa Rica concern over the activities or narco or organized crime entities in the area.

As his words clearly exhibited, Solís absolutely dismissed Pastora’s claims that the Nicaraguan military needed to cross into Costa Rica to combat heavy drug trafficking that was taking place on Finca Aragon. Solís disagreed with Pastora’s position by noting that this was never the official reason presented by Nicaragua at any time throughout the duration of the dispute. Instead, he suggested that the source of contention for the Nicaraguans was, and has always been, based on the interpretation of border treaties and the border delimitations that were established along the eastern end of the frontier (i.e., the 1858 Treaty of Cañas-Jerez and E.P. Alexander’s 1897 rendering under President Cleveland).

Solís very well may be correct in saying that Pastora’s narco story was never the ‘official’ reason for the Nicaraguan invasion of Costa Rican territory. Pastora’s narrative of reclaiming and cleaning up an entire region that was overrun by drug trafficking is not a part of, nor is it relevant to, the case being heard at the ICJ. While the Nicaraguan incursion into Finca
Aragon in Costa Rica to ‘combat drug trafficking’ may not rest at the core of the conflict, it does fit within the local context. Solís simply claimed that he did not have sufficient knowledge to verify this account of the story and instead partially blamed the escalation of events on the response of Chinchilla administration.

But I wouldn’t say, I don’t have enough information to say that the Nicaraguan military moved to Calero because of their concern about operations of narcos in that region. Well first of all because I don’t think that we had any significant asentamientos or settlements of narcos in Isla Calero and mostly because I think their reaction was preceded by a very unfortunate position of the Costa Rican police force of making a point of going to Calero to affirm our sovereignty with a display of force that was unnecessary. Again, that doesn’t mean that we couldn’t do it, it was our territory, but had we stayed, which we should have done, that would have meant probably a military clash between the two countries. And that would have had very devastating effects upon the relationships. It could have been very serious. No, but I don’t think, I don’t have information regarding narco trafficking in that area. That they took over because they had a problem with narco [trafficking]. [22:20]

Conversely, Solís suggested that Nicaragua’s actions were in part a response to the Costa Rican security measure directed by Jose Maria Tijerino, Minister of Public Security, to send eighty police officers to the region. Having not been in office at the onset of the border dispute, he can easily distance himself from the initial Costa Rican response carried out by the Chinchilla administration. He referred to the display of force as “unnecessary” and shared his opinion that if the police entered the region, they should have stayed.

Although the police did not stay in the conflict zone, they were stationed nearby in places like Barra del Colorado, Agua Dulce, and Delta, Costa Rica. Considering that there were only two police officers in the remote border posts prior to the conflict, the increase in police presence was massive. However, it was not the numerical increase itself that was profound. It was the way in which the police were ordered to go about the new surveillance and protection of national sovereignty that drew the attention of the nation. In 2010 and 2011, police were photographed leaping out of planes and helicopters, draped in ammunition belts at the landing strip in Barra del
Colorado Sur. They were recorded and broadcast on national news channels practicing drills in tactical military gear while strapped with M-15s.

It was a deliberate tactic meant to send the message to Pastora that even though Costa Rica does not have a standing army, the country was prepared should armed conflict arise. The display of ‘military might’ and resources was unusual and unprecedented in Costa Rica. Solís alluded to how this approach likely escalated events during the beginning of the dispute. He also interestingly commented on the same incident that Pastora brought up in his narrative about the Costa Rican police retreating from the conflict zone, a maneuver that he believed was a mistake. During Pastora’s recounting of this event, he took great delight, even joking that he had to go in and rescue the Costa Rican flag because the police left it behind while fleeing the Sandinistas and the harsh jungle conditions. Regardless of the actual story, what was important to Solís was that once the police went in, he believed they should have stayed. Solís suggested that the initial Costa Rican security response was mishandled and this likely was a factor in the border build-up and Nicaraguan occupation of Finca Aragon. He continued by stressing that irrelevant of the scenario, one cannot just invade a neighboring country.

Now, the argument that the Nicaraguan military or Nicaraguan security forces were forced to intervene because of the fact that there was so much activity in the Costa Rican side of the border, that threatened somehow Nicaragua’s sovereignty, etc. etc. Is not valid because if that is the case, then any country would be entitled to get into somebody else’s territory to pursue, you know? And if their concern was such, which would be legitimate, then they should have coordinated with Costa Rican authorities to deal with it and even to expose Costa Rican authorities had they been involved in the traffic itself.

But it is complicated to imagine that a country would move into somebody else’s territory to do a drug operation that nobody is knowledgeable about. Not even the DEA and other agencies that operate in the area. [30:43] I mean, I can assure you that a movement of that significance or a situation of that significance that operation base of the narcos in Calero would have been at least registered by the US governments authorities operating in the area. It’s just something that would not go away, would not happen without their knowledge. And we had not received any information about that.
Solís’ conclusion that the Nicaraguan movement onto Isla Calero was unjustifiable even in the event of a drug operation is valid. However, Solís’ claim that the Costa Rican government was not aware of it is another question. The independent, nonprofit research institute InSight Crime documented that Nicaraguan authorities have been informed of the Tarzanes’ alleged activity since the 1990s. The foundation’s extensive public database, which includes multiple entries on the Tarzanes, serves as proof that they were not operating without detection in the region. Further, the digital military magazine Diálogo (2014) reported that “The OIJ had been investigating the activities of Reyes Aragon and Los Tarzanes since 2012, according to OIJ Director Francisco Segura Montero.” Other media sources also reported at length on the role of Los Tarzanes in the Rio San Juan region as early as 2010 (Confidencial, 2010).

According to Solís’ argument, the point is moot. He doubted the validity of the claims, and even if there was some truth to it, he was quick to recognize that it was not a legally justifiable reason to invade a neighboring country. Solís is not naïve to the reality of what is happening on the border. Speaking more generally, Solís commented at length on the favorable, porous security conditions present in the border region that contribute to an environment in which organized crime groups can easily operate. He admitted:

[31:22] Now, that the drug movements in the border between Costa Rica and Nicaragua are very fluid and you have all sorts of circumstances that favor that. That, that’s true. It’s unquestionable. And the [small] amount of the authorities that we have there. Again, the lack of population, of infrastructure tend to facilitate that very much.

One can make hypotheses of the way in which organized crime, not only narco trafficking, but organized crime in general behaves in that area. I mean, it’s very scarcely populated, it is very difficult terrain, you know the police forces and the army forces move with a lot of difficulty through that region. Infrastructure is basically nil. We don’t have huge communities alongside the border and so the dynamics of narco trafficking and organized crime, including the traffic of persons and weapons, and the whole thing, is complicated.
Throughout the duration of the interview, President Solís conveyed his in-depth knowledge of existing security challenges on the border, such as the lack of infrastructure and economic development for the isolated border population. As he explained, the nearly impenetrable terrain, lack of roads and navigation options, distance from public services, and lack of job opportunities created a situation that was specific to the border region. Furthermore, considering the extreme violence that plagues men in other Central American nations due in part to organized crime and narcotrafficking, Solís undoubtedly recognized the import and intricacies of the issues at hand.

It [drug trafficking] is a source of grave concern and I think the only way to deal with it is bi-nationally or tri-nationally because there’s no country, no country has the force to handle narco trafficking by itself. I mean, that’s a general premise in the whole Caribbean area and on the Pacific as well.

Otherwise, if the traffic in that area is just the result of the dynamics of narcotrafficking which is my sensation, my belief is that it’s out of control. Nobody can control, completely, what happens, particularly there. And probably some authorities are accomplices of the *narcos* and many members of the communities, because they are poor- whatever, we know the sociology of the problem. Then whatever happened there, what it requires is a binational approach. And clearly the Costa Rican authorities and the Nicaraguan authorities even within the context of the conflict, the ongoing territorial conflict, collaborate with each other when need be.

In an effort to resolve some of the security, organized crime, and development issues that plague the forgotten border region, Solís suggested a binational or multinational approach. While he did not deny the role drugs play in the region, he was quick to note that this problem requires regional collaboration. As he explained, it is not a problem that the Costa Rican state can tackle on its own. Also of interest was his comment in which he mentioned (even in the midst of the border conflict over Isla Calero) binational cooperation with Nicaragua as an integral part of a solution. This statement not only demonstrated his openness to regional cooperation and good foreign relations, but it also highlighted his views on the potential to work with Nicaragua on
different issues if needed, regardless of the conflict over the border. It also expressed his commitment to prioritize the common good for both nations and their people on important matters. Beyond the general security and social issues that are fueled by heavy drug trafficking, however, Solís was less convinced of Pastora’s benevolent role presented in his narrative. Solís’ emphasis was on the import of the rule of law and he will not compromise nor acknowledge Pastora’s claims. For Solís, the border conflict always was and remains a dispute over the interpretation of border treaties, rooted in a deep historical context, that threatened the sovereignty of the state of Costa Rica and her land possessions.

I do hope that somehow the court recognizes the legitimacy of Costa Rica’s claim over Calero. Then I think we are going to be ready to begin reconstructing the diplomatic bonds which have not been interrupted but which have been hurt by this whole thing. I am not interested in pursuing a policy of forever irritating Nicaragua or whatever, what I want is to normalize relations and move on. I have insisted very much that whatever problems the two governments have should not affect the good relations between the Nicaraguan and Costa Rican people in the border. [41:23]… So I think that the key to this is the rule of law. The capacity of both countries to admit the ruling of the court as definitive.

Solís is clearly motivated by the larger legal implications that the ICJ ruling will have on national sovereignty, land rights, and maritime boundaries. To use his words, the border problem in Isla Calero is a “serious question of territorial control,” one that has yet to be resolved since the formation of Central American nation states. By discussing the relevant historical treaties and efforts stemming from the nineteenth century focused on solving border delimitation discrepancies, it becomes evident that the 2010-2015 border conflict was a contemporary, political (re)making of an age-old controversy. In fact, a vast amount of attention was given to this part of the border early on because the route was considered so valuable as a potential inter-oceanic canal route. Beginning in 1811, the water route along the Rio San Juan was surveyed and
mapped as a viable contender for the route that David McCullough so famously termed, ‘the path between the seas’ (1977).

The two different accounts of the same border dispute, presented side by side in this chapter, offer an interesting glimpse into how political leaders craft narratives for political posturing and gain. The handling of the border dispute was a defining political moment for all leaders involved and the conflict greatly shaped the national landscape from 2010-2015. The comparison between Pastora’s and Solis’ narrative is interesting because it shows how political leaders reignite nationalistic sentiments by drawing upon national histories and centuries-old treaties.
PART III. THE LOCAL SETTING

CHAPTER 4: THE COMMUNITY

Geography

The village of Delta, Costa Rica is located at the juncture of the San Juan and Colorado Rivers on the aquatic portion of the eastern stretch of the Costa Rica-Nicaragua border. Delta, along with seven other small villages, make up the district of Llanuras del Gaspar that in turn belongs to the Sarapiquí canton in the province of Heredia, Costa Rica. As the name implies, this point marks the beginning of the San Juan River delta, which drains a massive binational water basin and the largest fresh water system in Central America to the Caribbean Sea via several mouths. One such mouth is the Colorado River, the primary passage that carries nearly two-thirds of the water flow out to the Caribbean Sea. Parting way from the Colorado River at Delta, Costa Rica and extending roughly 20 kilometers to the sea, the San Juan River is another drainage route emptying into the natural bay at the Nicaraguan town of San Juan del Norte, also known as Greytown. Beginning at Delta and moving eastward, the international geopolitical border follows the southern bank of the San Juan River.

The community of Delta, Costa Rica encompasses a radius of roughly 4 kilometers around the juncture of the rivers on the Costa Rican side of the border. The closest hamlet to the west of Delta is a tiny coupling of houses (and a primary school) known as San Antonio. To the south, following the path of the Colorado River, the neighboring hamlet is referred to as Delta Colorado, another community of several homesteads centered around a school. Moving east, following the course of the San Juan River, there is a hamlet known as El Jobo that splits the geopolitical border with a few houses on both the Nicaraguan and Costa Rican sides of the river. El Jobo, Nicaragua is also home to a schoolhouse. Due north of Delta on the opposite side of the
The climate of the region is hot and humid due to Delta’s location in the Caribbean coastal lowlands. The average temperature is about 85°F. The area is sparsely populated due to the inhospitable climate and geographic isolation. The elevation ranges from 0 to 100 meters. Due to an average annual rainfall of between 5,000 and 6,000 millimeters and the geographical location at the mouth of a vast river system, the region is subject to extensive seasonal flooding. The precipitation patterns distinguish the two seasons—a wet season and a dry season. During the dry period, the lack of rainfall and strong sun make for a brutal heat that dries up wells and the river, revealing huge sand bars that complicate river navigation. However, twice a year, typically in July and December, the rains commence, and local tributaries surge the riverbanks, transforming the floodplains into boundless sheets of water. Livestock is moved to the highest ground (of which there is little) and rotated between pastures to avoid sickness and loss of animals.
The “banks of the river…are generally low, and covered with palms, canes, and a species of high, coarse grass called *gamalote*” (Squier 1852, 28). The picturesque virgin terrain is home to some of the world’s most biologically diverse flora and fauna which thrive in the region’s tropical rainforests and marshland habitats. It is an unruly natural beauty that is breathtaking. Writer Mark Twain captured the essence of the region during a voyage in 1866-1867 from San Francisco to New York City aboard one of Cornelius Vanderbilt’s Accessory Transit Company steamboats. On the stretch of the Rio San Juan nearest to Delta, he wrote:

Now and then a rollicking monkey scampered into view, or a bird of splendid plumage floated through the sultry air, or the music of some invisible songster welled up out of the forest depths. The changing vistas of the river ever renewed the intoxicating picture; corners and points folding backward revealed new wonders beyond, of towering walls of verdure—gleaming cataracts of vines pouring sheer down a hundred and fifty feet, and mingling with the grass upon the earth—wonderful waterfalls of green leaves as deftly overlapping each other as the scales of a fish—a vast green rampart, solid a moment, and then, as we advanced, changing and opening into Gothic windows, colonnades—all manner of quaint and beautiful figures! Sometimes a limbless veteran of the forest stood aloof in his flowing vine-robés, like an ivy-clad tower of some old feudal ruin. (Twain 1940, 50)

The historical route along the San Juan River that Twain once traveled still serves as the region’s bloodlines today, as there are no roads within the community.¹ Since cellular service is limited beyond Delta, the rivers still facilitate the primary movement of people, resources, and information. The access provided by these essential waterways shapes settlement patterns and produces a locally understood notion of regionality among residents in the numerous small villages that make up the border region, Costa Rican and Nicaraguan alike. For example, all homesteads and farmlands are adjacent to and accessible from the river. Typically, a lot is cleared from the riverbanks back toward the jungle on which simple abodes are constructed

¹ A controversial border road was constructed in 2010 that leads to and abruptly ends at Delta, Costa Rica. See chapter Chapter 2 on development for further discussion. All travel beyond Delta is restricted to boat transportation. Prior to 2010, all travel and movement of goods to and from Delta, Costa Rica were by boat.
facing the river. This structure is usually adjoined by a small plot of cleared land for subsistence agriculture. Large grazing pastures are cut from the virgin forests behind the houses using the slash and burn technique. Then the pastures are demarcated with fencing as they stretch to the rear of the property where they eventually are swallowed up by the dense jungle. The rivers are aquatic highways granting quick and effective movement between the farms, for neighbors and villages alike. Land route cattle trails at the edge of the river exist but are long and slow to walk. Movement through the interior is extremely difficult; it requires the use of a machete and is only feasible during the dry season. For this reason, dugout canoes or small fiberglass boats with outboard motors, known as pagers, are necessary and comprise the preferred and most used form of transportation.

The village center at Delta, Costa Rica can be accessed via the border road, or la trocha, formally named La Ruta 1856 Juan Rafael Mora Porras after the Costa Rica president and national hero who defeated filibuster William Walker’s advances on the San Juan River in 1856. Although many people in Costa Rica know of the infamous trocha, finding its beginning is a different task. To arrive at the trocha, and ultimately to Delta, one must travel four hours from Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí, the nearest urban center which provides public services and utilities such as banks, pharmacies, a gas station, supermarkets, a post office, and hardware/agricultural supply stores. All items that cannot be harvested from the land or water are hauled or shipped in from Puerto Viejo. Examples of these items include gasoline, animal feed, veterinary supplies, pesticide, fertilizers, cooking oil, or construction materials.

Departing from Puerto Viejo on a paved road, one passes through miles of agro-industrial banana and pineapple plantations followed by colossal haciendas dedicated to cattle raising before catching the rural, gravel road that eventually leads to la trocha. Roughly two hours into
the trek, the cell phone signal vanishes, and one can sense the shift in landscape from vast open haciendas to an encroaching, dense tunnel of tropical jungle. In many places, bridges are constructed by local residents and consist simply of giant tree trunks laid across gaping stream gullies packed solid with sandbags. The rocky jungle road eventually hits the San Juan River head-on at the border village of Fatima. The first glimpses of the chocolatey San Juan River are impressive and there is no mistaking that one has arrived at the aquatic border. This is where one picks up *la trocha* at a 90-degree right-hand turn. From here, one follows the single string of electrical wire and the shoddy border road parallel to the river, bump after bump, to the road’s end at Delta.

**Physical Layout**

Pulling into Delta, the first thing that draws one’s attention is a massive red and white telecommunications tower protruding high above the village in sharp contrast to the serene natural setting. Soaring lower than the tower, yet still above the rooftops, is a deliberately massive Costa Rica national flag mounted high to remind all (including the Nicaraguans who can see it from across the river) that this area is Costa Rican territory. On the right-hand side of the road are the school grounds, which house a recently constructed primary school, a second building used for community purposes, and the old abandoned one-room schoolhouse.

Across from the school about 100 meters away, located on the banks of the Colorado River, is the border police post. In front of the police post are the police living quarters (two large blue shipping containers painted with the words “Policia de Fronteras”) and another Costa Rican flag. There are two public payphones that never functioned during my time in Delta. They are located next to the police post. Throughout the course of this research, MINAE, the Costa

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2 See Chapter 2 on development for a complete discussion on infrastructural development in Delta since the start of the conflict.
Rican Ministry of Environment and Energy, was constructing a vigilance and control post that will house armed environmental police in the future. It was not yet in use or housing officers when I left the field.

![Police living quarters at Delta, Costa Rica. 11/08/2014](image)

**Figure 22.** Police living quarters at Delta, Costa Rica. 11/08/2014

Off to the right of the border police post is an abandoned two-story wooden home, a *pulperia* (general store), and several *cabinas* run by the owner of the general store. Beyond the cabins is a public dock, which is basic in construction and consists of large concrete steps leading to the water’s edge. It is rarely used except by residents on the other side of the river who occasionally unload cattle to take to auction or cross heavy building materials or farm supplies. Residents on a daily basis simply prefer to run their boats aground into the soft, muddy slopes of the riverbank in front of the general store where they easily tie their boats to a tree as they come and go.

There are a few communal spaces where people gather together. The benches outside the *pulperia*, the clearing/bus stop next to the police post, and the public dock are the few public spaces where community members socialize. Since the village lacks basic staples such as a church, medical facilities, a soccer field, or even a ramshackle *cantina*, many locals (and visitors)
pull up a stool and plop down in the kitchen at the general store. Providing goods and information to the community, this is where the majority of social interactions takes place. To many residents of Delta, this kitchen is the heart of the community.

**Demographics of the Population**

The residents of Delta, Costa Rica live dispersed from the village center out on large farms along the river. The census conducted in July of 2015, in collaboration with the Red Cross, counted a total of 41 families living in Delta. Based on the nationality of the head of household, 23 out of 41 households or 56% were Nicaraguan. Similarly, 18 out of 41 households or 44% were of Costa Rican nationality. These numbers represent self-reported nationalities and many adults in the border region have identification documents from both countries.\(^3\) The number of students enrolled at the primary school at any given time fluctuated between ten and twelve children. However, over the course of the research, due to the mobile nature of migrant lifestyle, twenty different children attended the school over a fifteen-month period. One student from Delta was of high school age and he attended the secondary school located in La Aldea one and a half hours away by bus.

**Housing**

Each homestead in Delta, Costa Rica sits on a corresponding tract of farmland varying in size from a few to several hundred hectares. The largest property amounts to over one thousand hectares, but the average farm size consists roughly of twenty to forty hectares. All of the homesteads consist of a minimum of two wooden structures; the house and a corral for the

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\(^3\) Any form of identification, valid and expired, from any country was accepted for reporting in the census. No more than one form of identification was requested; therefore, individuals who have both Costa Rican and Nicaraguan documents were counted based on the identification they provided. Since nationality and migratory status have no effect on ability to receive aid from the Red Cross, it is assumed that respondents presented identification from their country of origin. In the event that respondents had no papers, they were counted as Nicaraguan.
animals. Many properties also have a detached kitchen, outhouse, shed for farm supplies, and oftentimes smaller living quarters for peons or additional farmhands. Property lines and pastures are demarcated by three strands of barbed wire strung between fence posts, which are sown tree cuttings inserted into the ground every few feet. Enough land separates the homes so that the neighboring house is typically out of sight, reachable by a short walk down the border road or the cattle trail along the river. Any land that is not cleared and demarcated with fencing is dense, uninhabitable jungle.

The homes are simple structures built of wood with a combination of zinc, plastic tarp, and/or palm leaf roofs. The wood is usually repurposed from an older, non-functioning structure. However, residents also illegally\(^4\) obtain wood by tilling huge *Caobilla* or *Gavilán* trees, Crabwood (*Carapa guianensis*), and Paradise-trees (*Simarouba glauca*). When wood is illegally cut, residents will coordinate with neighbors to keep a lookout in case the sound of the chain saw (which echoes through the river valley) alerts the border or environmental police. Several residents have shared stories of being apprehended, handcuffed, detained at local police posts, then transported to jails in the city of Guapiles for tilling trees and using the wood from their farms for personal use. Once tried and found guilty in a court of law, this environmental crime is punishable with a fine or community service in the form of replanting a mandated number of tree saplings. The strict enforcement of this law combined with the difficulty of bringing in construction materials is a large contributing factor to the poor housing conditions in Delta.

The wooden houses are typically one-story (sometimes two) and are raised between 2-6 feet off the ground to protect against flooding during the rainy season. The most basic houses,

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\(^4\) Since Delta, Costa Rica is located within the boundaries of the Barra del Colorado Wildlife Refuge, the tilling of trees is prohibited without permission from MINAET (Costa Rica’s Ministry of the Environment, Energy and Technology). Residents complain that the process to obtain permission is bureaucratic, far away, and unlikely to grant authorization so they typically choose to cut the trees illegally in a clandestine fashion.
generally belonging to the migrant population, consist of one or two rooms. They are devoid of windows and lack division between sleeping quarters. The most common sleeping arrangement is in a hammock, although some people have beds made from foam cushions while others sleep on wooden planks.

*Figure 23.* A house in Delta, Costa Rica constructed of wood, zinc, and plastic tarp. A blue barrel is used to capture rainwater for household use and drinking. A solar panel provides minimal energy to charge a cell phone or several low watt light bulbs at night.

Bathroom facilities are pit latrines within an outhouse located away from the home. The kitchens are also located outside, either in a separate structure or as an open-air extension to the house. Cooking is done over a fire, except in a few homes of the resident landowners in which case gas cylinders are brought in for cooking on two-burner stovetops. The sinks of cooking areas are made of several slabs of wood where fish, meat, and other food are cleaned and prepared. Waste water runs to the ground and collects below.
Figure 24. The detached kitchen of a home in Delta
Located adjacent to the riverbank, the kitchen consists of a wooden structure with a zinc roof and a dirt floor. There is a wood-burning stove and a wood-plank sink in the rear opening facing the river.

During a conversation with a Red Cross worker active in the region for over twenty-five years, he spoke about the general conditions and sanitation problems in homes in Delta. He recounted:


The conditions of the kitchen are totally unhealthy. What do I mean by that? Well, they don’t have a sink to cook. The sinks are two or three slabs of wood. That’s how all of the sinks are. They are just slabs of wood. And how much contamination germinates there on just one little piece of wood? And they have big boards. And they wash clothes there, cook there, throw waste there, bathe the children, they do everything there.

The Red Cross workers were quick to identify the kitchen sink and the water receptacle tanks as two major sources of contamination. As he mentioned, the sinks are used for all
household activities with little or no caution against cross-contamination, especially in regard to cooking and food preparation. Although the Red Cross services over eighty communities from their post in Puerto Viejo de Sarapiqui, Delta is one of their high-priority communities due to the isolation, high levels of poverty, and severe seasonal flooding that leaves many residents stranded without food and potable water. During emergencies, they bring in water supplies, non-perishable food, and other resources such as second-hand clothing and cooking supplies or utensils. When they meet with the community to hand out aid, they use the census list of community household heads and they distribute only to individuals on the list. They also hold charlas or information sessions when they are present in the community providing small lessons or best practices on a range of themes, such as sanitation, hygiene, emergency protocol, and other topics.

The Red Cross plays an important role in supporting the community. Their insights and relationships provided an in-depth level of information and access. During my time in the field, it became clear that they were the only NGO dedicated to making meaningful contributions to better the community of Delta, Costa Rica.
CHAPTER 5: THE SOCIAL SCENE IN DELTA, COSTA RICA

Having previously discussed the community and living conditions of Delta, Costa Rica, this chapter now turns to the sociocultural dynamics of the village life. The purpose of Chapter 5 is to define and describe the social relations among the different groups and collectivities in Delta. The border conflict not only drastically changed the infrastructure in the region, but it also greatly impacted the social reality with the influx of dozens of police and security personnel. This chapter focuses on understanding this new social environment and what it means to the different groups involved. The population of the border region can be broken down into three main social entities: patróns, peons, and police. This chapter begins with a discussion of socially significant factors related to group boundaries and membership for each entity, followed by a discussion of the social structure or intergroup relations in Delta.

**Los Patróns**

Los patróns, or the bosses, in the community of Delta, Costa Rica are landowning individuals who provide employment in the form of manual labor to other members or the community. The land and animal possessions of the patróns (and the subsequent labor their capital requires) form the sole source of economic productivity in the form of cattle raising characteristic of the region. This form of capital thus grants the landowners a privileged position in the community due to their unique ability to offer employment to the rest of the population.

Similarly, individuals belonging to this group are overwhelmingly of Costa Rican nationality. This is so much the case that in usage, un patrón, implies that one is of Costa Rican nationality. Belonging to this social collectivity carries with it an elevated status defined by

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1 The land falling within 2 kilometers of the international border is protected by Law No. 6043 and prohibits residents from obtaining land titles, although they have possession rights based on their presence and time spent in the region.
wealth, occupation, family membership, and nationality. This status in turn structures the labor hierarchy of the village, placing patróns at the top. Furthermore, it is also important to mention that being of Costa Rican nationality implies notions of race constructed in part by an imagined “white” exceptionalism, often referred to as the “white legend,” an imagined ideal which stems from colonial myths of Spanish descent and superiority of living in a peaceful “agrarian democracy” (Biesanz et al. 1999; Edelman 1992, 26; Palmer and Molia 2004, 9-12).

Similar to many patróns in the surrounding rural communities, the majority of patróns in Delta descend from the Costa Rican canton of San Carlos, a large agricultural and livestock region in the central province of Alajuela where they also maintain primary residences. Many of the properties in Delta, in fact, belong to one influential extended family that began purchasing property at extremely low prices after the fighting of the Nicaraguan Contra War ceased in the late 1980s. Members of this extended family hold political office at the local, regional, and national levels, ranging from positions on the local schoolboard to the Costa Rican National Legislative Assembly in San Jose. They also own the only two lodging options in the area, from which additional income is generated aside from the cattle enterprise.

It was explained to me that this family learned of the land opportunity from an acquaintance who fought with the Contras in the border region. This individual was from Terrón Colorado in San Carlos, Costa Rica, but became very familiar with the region due to the time he spent fighting in the border region. The violence of the Contra War left the border region vacant and barren. Residents from both sides of the border fled and sought refuge in Costa Rica. Nicaraguans who needed assistance settled in refugee camps in areas such as Boca Arenal, Alvaperal or other towns located in the northern border region (Larson 1993). During the war, some 34,000 Nicaraguans officially registered as refugees in Costa Rica and sought shelter and
aid from the United Nations and Costa Rican government (Larson 1993). Interestingly, and further supporting the claim of deep ties between Delta and the San Carlos region, some of the Nicaraguan migrants now living in Delta were employees of and maintain relationships with current *patróns* in Delta dating back to this moment in history. So, in this sense, the movement of people back to Delta after the war did not solely consist of those purchasing property but also of their Nicaraguan laborers they came to know in San Carlos as well.

It was these types of bilateral ties and familiarity, forged in the displacement of the fighting and later facilitated by the Rio San Juan, that led to the influx of San Carleños and their laborers to Delta in the post-war era. With direct access to Delta via the San Carlos and San Juan Rivers, they slowly began purchasing and repopulating the area. The original San Carleño *patron*, who purchased land in Delta at the recommendation of his Contra fighter friend, continued to acquire plots of land with a San Carlos business partner. He now has the largest property holdings in Delta, which to date total over 1,000 hectares. Since San Carlos is a rural, highly productive agricultural and cattle-raising region, the transition to the border region economy was easy and familiar. Those who ventured to Delta did so because they already had the skill sets, land techniques, and management experience to make it a lucrative endeavor. Several San Carleño landowners in the region (both inside and outside of Delta) have become multi-millionaires in the past few decades due to their vast landholdings, cattle possessions, and farms.

The farms in Delta are different from those of San Carlos in that agriculture is only for subsistence, not production. The vast tracks of land held by *los patróns* are largely unproductive as they are primarily used for cattle herding and rotation, in which profits are earned through the sale of fattened animals and their byproducts, primarily milk and cheese. The amount of land
owned by local patróns, measured in hectares, pales in comparison to the landed families and massive generational latifundios of Guanacaste, described in other Costa Rican studies (Edelman 1992). However, the accumulations in Delta only date back to the late 1980s and considering this timeframe, the differentiations in land accumulations of patróns and the landless peons are both apparent and significant.

**Status**

The status of the patróns or landowners is derived from several factors. The first is their wealth or control of capital (in the form of land and animals) which allots them a respected and privileged role as sole providers of employment. Since there are little or no other forms of economic activity in the border region, the patróns’ ability to contract workers (albeit at extremely low wages) grants them a privileged position within the labor structure of the local economy. A second factor is membership in an affluent family with political ties based in San Carlos or another central region of Costa Rica. The ability of patróns to activate these familial and social ties to pull together resources quickly further reifies their social position. This capacity to gather valuable resources quickly in the isolated border region is a commodity that is equally (if not more) valuable than the land itself. Some examples of these resources include political support, government funding for community projects, and sponsors for extravagant activities like horseback riding outings and dances used as community fundraisers to benefit the school or Development Association. These factors are not unrelated to their nationality and the benefits that entails.

Since they are of Costa Rican nationality, and typically born and raised (and in the case of absentee landowners, still residing) in the central parts of the country, they are familiar with navigating social services and institutional bureaucracies that are foreign and often confusing to
the Nicaraguan migrant population. The *patróns* have the connections necessary to ‘*traer cosas de afuera*’ or ‘bring things in from the outside’ for personal use, communal benefit, or profit. This ability to control the influx and distribution of goods, supplies, and information is part and parcel to their economic and social position in the community.

For example, landowners coordinate the delivery of dry goods and construction supplies through contacts and credit lines with business owners in Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí, the nearest city. They also arrange for livestock trucks to arrive at Delta to transport cattle to auction or to other farms in the interior. In the remote border region, charging a small fee to peons for access to these connections within the Costa Rican heartland provides valuable and vital resources that otherwise would be out of reach for most farmhands.

Landowners have extensive webs of contacts and relationships with people outside of Delta who can send in supplies of hard-to-get products such as cases of beer, bottles of liquor, cigarettes, prepaid calling cards, printer cartridges, certain specialty grocery items (vegetables, chicken bouillon, soaps, deodorant, etc.), or other scarce items in high demand in Delta. People who circulate in and out of the border region on a somewhat regular basis comprise the core of this social network. Examples include the bus driver who goes to the city three times a week, the police, other landowners in San Carlos who come to visit, the Red Cross, truck drivers, delivery men, cattle haulers, and tour guides, to name a few examples. When they are in need of supplies or products, the landowners can call upon this extended network for favors and/or to bring resources to them. Established connections with business owners of grocery stores, hardware stores, or feed stores in the city provide accounts and credit lines to facilitate the purchase or advance of products. For example, when the local general store needs a shipment of rice, beans, or cooking oil, a call is placed to the *almacen* or well-stocked store in Puerto Viejo. The store
employee will pack up the large shipment, haul it outside, and have someone waiting across the
street at the curb at 1:00 pm when the bus driver passes in route to Delta. In a brief exchange, the
bus makes a quick stop, the employee hoists the shipment onto the bus, and the driver will see
that the products arrive safely to Delta where the general store owner will receive them.

When they are unable to acquire the resources they need through their networks, the
landowners have the ability to send a family member to run the errand or to leave the border
region themselves. Typically, they hitch a ride with someone who circulates in and out of the
border on a regular basis. The bus is a last option and seldom used by the *patróns*. This is
significant because landowners leave the border region at much higher rates than the migrant
population. The expenses and time involved, the loss of a day’s wages, and unfamiliarity with
the city are all factors that contribute to why migrants leave Delta less frequently. The
landowners leave for a multitude of reasons, some of which are to visit family members in San
Carlos for special occasions (birthdays, baptisms, funerals) or to make large purchases such as
refrigerators, fans, and cell phones or to seek medical attention. However, even for the
landowners, a trip to the heartland of Costa Rica is avoided when possible and reserved for
special or last-case scenarios. In addition to the time involved and having to find/pay someone to
watch over one’s property, the trek to the city is long, arduous, and ultimately not an enjoyable
endeavor for anyone.

On these trips inland, the landowners often carry out simple favors such as buying
prepaid cell phone minutes, depositing money in the bank, paying for a solar panel bill,
purchasing batteries, or acquiring medicines at city pharmacies on behalf of the migrant
population. These favors are usually for the benefit of one’s direct laborers and typically only
conducted when the task does not infringe on their own agenda. The *patróns* also routinely serve
as a gateway to information to the outside world, providing insight into how or where to file paperwork, acquire school supplies/uniforms, or arrange for specialists to come to the village. Some examples of this are facilitating the arrival and appointments of an optometrist or dentist and coordinating enrollment for classes of trade school instructors who teach short courses on boat motor mechanics and sustainable agricultural techniques, such as converting cow manure into cooking fuel or creating a hydroponic garden using a tilapia pool (techniques that I never saw employed by anyone after the class).

In extreme or urgent cases, the *patróns* accompany migrant families or household heads to the city, knowing that without their assistance, they likely would not go. One such example involved a landowner who took a Nicaraguan migrant mother and her Costa Rican son to the city to solicit identification and paperwork so he could attend high school. Without these necessary documents, he would not have attended high school. Another example involved an injured girl who was in desperate but not urgent need of medical care.

*Los Peones*

*Los peones*, literally translated in English to peons, are the migrant peasant farmhands that make up the rural labor force in the community of Delta. As Edelman (1992) noted in his extensive work on rural labor relations in Guanacaste, the term *peón* in this context generally refers to “the poorest and least skilled rural laborers,” but he noted it can also be applied to *sabaneros*, or cowboys, a group with a slightly higher occupational status (389). This holds true in Delta, where the term *peón* can be applied very broadly to any type of day laborer, regardless of skill level and work tasks performed. The term is also applied to the members of the laborers’ family, regardless of their participation in farm work. In this sense, it can be and is often used in a derogatory fashion, conflating class, race, dialect, Nicaraguan nationality (and thus illegality
and otherness) as these workers are primarily undocumented migrant men accompanied by their wives and children.

Due to the nature of intensive farm work, these men are of productive working age and accustomed to the rigorous schedules and physical demands associated with this type of labor. The level of formal education among the Nicaraguan peons is minimal and many are illiterate. In one count of 36 Nicaraguan households receiving humanitarian aid in the border region, a total of 6 or 17% signed off with an inked fingerprint. In comparison, of the 16 Costa Rican households in the same count, only one head of house signed using a fingerprint. Nevertheless, the peons possess a deep knowledge set on a variety of topics such as animal husbandry, veterinarian skills, cultivation techniques, dairy production, construction of fencing/corrals, and information about local plant and wildlife. Their children, many of whom travel by canoe to attend school, comprise the large majority of the student body at the local primary school, Escuela La Esperanza in Delta. The children are well versed in domestic and farm duties by the time they enter school and divide their days evenly between academic and labor activities. Children attend school in the morning beginning at or before 7:00 am and are finished by 1:00 pm at the latest. The remainder of their day is spent shadowing adults on the farm. The boys go with the male adults to the pastures, whereas the girls tend to domestic chores alongside the women.

The peons of all ages speak a Nicaraguan dialect of Spanish that is markedly different in both vocabulary and accent from Costa Rican Spanish. This is so much the case that residents recount how before the border dispute took place in 2010, in order to cross into Nicaragua at the Nicaraguan immigration post on the other side of the river, Nicaraguan border patrol would determine nationality and passage into Nicaragua based on asking people to speak. For this
reason, speaking Nicaraguan or the skill to “hablar Nica” has also been mastered by many Costa Rican border residents. The distinctive daily use of Nicaraguan sayings, such as “va pues” or “dale pues” in which the ‘s’ is silent, has been affectionately adopted by Costa Ricans in the border region, especially when communicating with Nicaraguans. These terms which are typically used as a farewell and loosely mean “go ahead then,” “all right then,” or “ok,” are examples of in-group language that Costa Ricans purposefully employ to show a sense of solidarity, compassion, and recognition for a shared space in the border region. This is one clear example of how all border residents create and participate in a shared border identity that sharply contrasts with derogatory stereotypes and language use common in the central regions of Costa Rica.

The Nicaraguan farmhands come from many different parts of Nicaragua, ranging from the other side of the San Juan River, to Bluefields on the Atlantic coast, or places several days of travel away such as Chinandega or Chontales, Nicaragua. While some migrants come to Delta from other regions of Costa Rica after labor operations cease in temporal agricultural work, others arrive via ties to San Carleño families. The migrant newcomers often arrive with no prior working arrangements and walk between the different farms or arrive to the general store seeking direction on work opportunities. Like los patróns who originally arrived by boat from San Carlos, they come to the region via the San Juan River. This aquatic route falls completely under Nicaraguan jurisdiction until the final river crossing into Costa Rica. Thus, this aquatic route delivers them many miles from home without the need for papers. Once in the border region, the migrants can easily secure a river crossing by boat to the Costa Rican side of the border and enter the country without having to pass through a Costa Rican immigration checkpoint or border post.
La Policia

The village of Delta, Costa Rica follows a simple stratification order comprised fundamentally of the two social collectivities previously discussed: *patróns* and peons. There is no middle class or social outliers save for the bus drivers and school teachers who only reside at Delta during the work week. Other individuals such as tour guides or government officials periodically circulate through the border outpost, but they do not occupy a permanent role in the village. The exception to this community dynamic is the presence of the *Fuerza Publica*, or the men and women of the National Police Force and Border Patrol. This third social unit, functioning as an institutionalized social corporation within the community, began in 2011\(^2\) with the onset of the conflict. The *Policía de Fronteras* or the Border Patrol Unit of the National Police Force have a permanent post in Delta, Costa Rica. Additional officers are maintained at two posts further inland from Delta, both of which are only accessible by boat. Throughout the duration of this research, they maintained roughly fifteen officers at the Delta post. However, it was reported that before my arrival, there were as many as forty officers at any given time. This was the case when I visited Delta in 2011.

Prior to the start of the conflict, only two police officers were at the ramshackle post in the forgotten border town of Delta. Now, however, residents are so accustomed to the new security presence that they can easily rattle off the slew of special forces that rotate in and out of Delta: “*Vigilancia, comando especiales, inteligencia, anti-narcoticos, fuerza aerea, seguridad nacional,*” to name a few.

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\(^2\) Barra del Colorado Sur was home to the largest police presence in the region from the start of the conflict in October of 2010 until August of 2011, at which point the majority of the police were relocated to Delta, Costa Rica.
The border police in Delta usually wear the traditional navy-blue police uniform; however, from time to time, a few utilize the light brown uniforms specifically designed for border patrol personnel. When the border police are active in the community carrying out routine tasks, such as washing their trucks or performing maintenance on their post, they wear their boots, the uniform cargo pant, and a dark navy t-shirt with the word “POLICIA” written on the front in bright yellow letters. There are two different squadrons, each with a different jefe or boss, that take turns rotating in and out of Delta in eight-day shifts. The police have three different freight containers/trailers that make up their post. Two are used as living quarters with built-in, stacked bunk beds and one serves as an administrative office overlooking the river. The original wooden police post that existed before the start of the conflict still exists but was modified to accommodate more police and it is still currently in use. The post is accessible from the water with stairs stretching up from the river. It serves as a quasi-immigration post recording vessel names and people that come and go cross the border.\(^3\)

An addition was built onto the original wooden structure sometime during or after 2012 to create a kitchen and storage area. Other enhancements include the massive and symbolic Costa Rican national flag erected above the post, and surveillance cameras that were installed in the treetops at the border station. Since the border conflict began in 2010, the Costa Rican state has gone to great lengths to visually establish symbols of national sovereignty on the border. The Costa Rican border police brought with them cameras, flags, patrol units, trucks, vans, quads, boats, floating docks, and even a helicopter pad. Writing on this practice, van Schendel (2005)

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\(^3\) The Costa Rican police post at Delta does not function as an official port of entry/exit. There is no official immigration post that can stamp passports or provide visas. The police do keep track of the names, identification numbers, and names of vessels that cross the border. The Nicaraguan post on the opposite side of the river does have an immigration/customs post in addition to the military post. Therefore, although one can technically exit Nicaragua at Delta, one must travel five hours by boat to officially re-enter Costa Rica if one requires official passport or visa stamps.
noted that these types of symbols, “pillars, flags, fences, and signboards” are commonly used in border regions to craft a presence purposefully. Markedly he stated, “a border that is not visible for all is a border that has failed its purpose” (2005:41). Both Nicaragua and Costa Rica followed this logic throughout the five-year border dispute. Nicaragua carried out a similar approach to building nationalistic imagery on the opposite side of the river.

In plain view from the front of the police post (and the vantage point of the Costa Rica security cameras), one can look out over the river and directly see the Nicaraguan Sandinista military post and adjacent immigration checkpoint. The immigration post on the Nicaraguan side does function as an official Nicaraguan port of entry, capable of carrying out immigration checks and other official tasks. The Sandinista military personnel stare back across the river from their barracks through a giant telescope, performing their own sense of bravado in the form of controversial dredging machinery painted with propaganda and the Sandinista colors of red and
black. It is a rather discomforting nationalistic showdown illustrative of the massive restructuring that has taken place at the border since the start of the conflict.

In fact, it was in response to the border conflict that the former president of Costa Rica, Laura Chinchilla, and the former Minister of Public Security, Jose Tijerino, created the border patrol branch of the National Police Force in 2011. The first brigade of inaugurated border police and security equipment was sent directly into the communities of the conflicted border region, including Delta. Today, they occupy three posts in the border region: one in Delta, another along the coastline in Agua Dulce, and a smaller station located in Barra del Colorado Sur. The majority of the rank-and-file police who circulate through Delta are young, new officers who come from many different regions of Costa Rica. Some hail from as far as Talamanca, a Caribbean community near the Panama border. Most are not familiar with the remoteness of a place like Delta and they interact minimally with the local community. The police chiefs are also not from Delta, but some maintain relationships with community leaders, all of which are Costa Rican patrons.

**Inter-group Relations**

With the distinct social entities of Delta outlined in the previous section of this chapter, the aim of this section is to provide a detailed discussion of how these social roles unfold into nuanced intergroup relations. The import of such an analysis rests in discerning the power structures and social processes at play during an epoch of great influx, conflict, and change. In examining the daily social relations present in Delta, Costa Rica, I follow the lead of Smith (1998) who defined social structure as “the set of social collectivities, units and relations within and between them which gives a society its characteristic and perduring form, boundaries, organization and processes or modes of operation” (82).
Patrón-Peon Relations

It is important to first reiterate that while the relationship between *patróns* and peons can be defined by many factors, such as nationality, (il)legality, language, and so on, it is foremost a labor arrangement formed through differential access to wealth in the form of land and animals. It is an exploitative labor relationship effectively implemented, at least in part, due to the dependency and fictive kinship ties associated with *hacendado* paternalism. This power relation promotes and maintains the privileged status of the patron at the perpetual expense of migrant worker peon. For example, a peon contracted to perform a day’s work of grueling manual labor will be paid ₡6,000 Costa Rican *colones* per day, which is just under $11 US dollars. This line of work involves completing farm tasks such as rotating or transporting cattle (including the forging of 1100-pound bulls across expansive rivers). It also can include clearing new pastures by chopping dozens of acres of jungle by hand with a machete using the slash and burn technique. Other common tasks are fumigating entire farms with toxic chemicals with hand-pump, spray tanks carried on the back. Peons are also contracted for specific jobs such as erecting/repairing pasture enclosures and packing and hauling heavy sacks of raw materials (such as sand or stone) from the riverbanks to be used in the construction of docks or corral floors. Most peons are contracted as day laborers and work on short-term projects in which their employment is temporary, precarious, dangerous, and labor-intensive.

Other peons, though much fewer in number, hold the most sought-after work arrangement in Delta, which is the more permanent and salaried position of farm administrator. Each landowner, regardless of whether they live on the farm or are absentee landowners, has at least one full-time peon in this position. This role is reserved for the most trusted, loyal, and skilled peons who are also generally older males and heads of household in migrant families. The
primary responsibilities and required skill set of this role are different than those of the day laborers. The permanent peon or farm administrator takes care of the routine daily chores and oversight. In regard to the animals (which are typically cows, bulls, horses, pigs, peccaries, and chickens), they must milk them, feed them, wean the calves from their mothers, rotate them to different pastures, make sure the irrigation system is providing water, monitor and count them, administer vaccinations, oversee animal births, and so on. As for the land, they may sow the land for pasture growth, fumigate the field with insecticide or fertilizer, cut the weeds by hand with a machete, and oversee the land and property to prevent theft and encroachment of squatters.

Other responsibilities of the more permanent peons are to pick up supplies or deliveries that may arrive at the general store, run errands in the *patrón’s* boat, construct or maintain shelters on the property, and see to the overall health and production of the farm. Some men in this role also take on managerial duties when larger jobs require multiple laborers. The *peon* farm administrator, under order from the *patrón*, will contract a specified number of day laborers to complete larger tasks. In this role, he recruits workers (usually family and acquaintances) to assist in duties such as slash and burn agriculture to clear virgin forest or to build a new dock at the entrance of the farm. The skilled permanent peons will oversee the day workers, oftentimes informally training them in the process. This is especially the case when they are family members such as sons, nephews, cousins, or in-laws.

The farm administrator may also take on financial responsibilities but notably only those related to secondary income sources such as dairy production, but never the overall profits or fiscal maneuvers of the farm. They may manage the production of cheeses or sour cream, keeping a detailed record of the supplies used and the outcome or weighed product. Additionally, peons working in this form of labor arrangement answer directly to their *patróns* and are often
called upon to perform labor tasks beyond the scope of the farm. They can be sent, on behalf of their *patrón*, to contribute to communal works and projects. For example, they may be sent to repair the road or cut the grass at the school or paint the communal salon. This is then viewed as the *patrón’s* contribution to the community project. In providing a monthly salary of $300-$500 a month, the *patróns* literally buy the labor, in all forms, of the peons.

While there is a distinction between these two labor arrangements, workers of both types are simply referred to using the general term, peons. When I inquired with one landowner about the job responsibilities of peons on a cattle farm, the following description was offered:

[32:35] Cuidar. Algunos chapea, pueden poner chapea, puede poner en... aquí la mayoría es siembra de pasto, chapea de maleza, eso es lo que hace un peón.

*Cuidar los animales, porque se usa aquí la mayoría es meten ganado en engorde, de desarrollo y engorde y lechero...em, y eso lo que se carga un peón; Revisar el ganado, contar lo, cambiar lo repasto y si está sucio, limpiarlo, cortar la maleza, dejar solo el pasto bueno que se comen el granado. Después este, ya cuando esta gordo, van cambiando lo de repasto. Eso es lo que hace un peón. [34:01]*

Look after things. Some chop, you can put them to chop, you can put them in...well, here the majority of work is to sow the grass, chop away the undergrowth. That is what a peon does.

They look after the animals, because here the main use is fattening cattle, to develop and fatten and dairy...and that is what a peon is in charge of doing. They inspect the cattle, count them, change pastures, and if its unkempt, they clean it, chop away the undergrowth, leaving just the good grass behind so that the cattle eat it. After that, when the cattle are fat, they rotate the pasture. That is what a peon does. [34:01]

In exchange for their labor, the *patróns* are responsible for paying not only this fixed monthly wage to their permanent workers, but also basic provisions which include: supplying their food in the form of *diarios* (packages usually consisting of rice, black beans, sugar, coffee, and cooking oil), providing housing, cooking supplies, and, in some cases, a dugout canoe or even a solar panel so they can charge cell phones and communicate with their workers from afar.

As described by landowners in Delta, a good *patrón* also pays a December *aguinaldo* or
Christmas bonus, which in the formal Costa Rican labor market is equivalent to one month’s pay. This is required by Law 2412 in Costa Rica, but since peons are not legal workers, only some *patróns* pay this in cash and only to loyal and trusted *peons*. *Patróns* might opt to provide other forms of bonuses to their workers, such as animals, land, or gifts. The *patróns* also provide all of the farm supplies and equipment necessary for the peons to care for and work the farm. The peons who are contracted as day workers do not receive these same types of accommodations, but it is expected that the *patrón* provide them with lunch (and usually morning and afternoon coffee) while they are working. This labor arrangement, tied directly to the *patróns’* unequal control of resources and exacerbated by the lack of available material goods and information due to geographic isolation in the border region, contributes to the formation of *hacendado* paternalism. As Wolf and Mintz (1957) identified in their seminal work on haciendas and plantation systems: “there tends to develop a collective representation of the hacienda owner as a symbolic ‘father,’ with the hacienda workers functioning as his symbolic ‘children.’ As the locus of power, the hacienda owner emerges as the major source of special favours as well as an allocator of perquisites…” (392).

Some examples of this in Delta include throwing Christmas parties for the peons and their families or the gifting of clothes, toys, special food items such as bread, or even instruments such as solar panels or cheap electronics for personal use. These acts, which are commonplace in Delta, are not benevolent acts of gratitude on behalf of the landowners. Rather, they are part and parcel to maintaining a nuanced relationship with their workers that balances the landowners’ privileged status vis-à-vis the migrant laborers’ precarious role with their employer. The mere ability to gift and lend items to their workers plays a large part of the power dynamic that permits the exploitation of migrants through dependency and indebtedness, which is then paid back in
the form of more loyalty and more work. “The significance of hacendado paternalism, like that of peon indebtedness to the hacendado, obviously takes on different meanings depending on the balance of forces between these two social classes” (Edelman 1992, 13). In Delta, the attitudes that accompany these paternalistic acts swing from remarks of empathy for the “pobres que no tienen nada” or ‘the poor people who have nothing’ to harsh accusations that ‘la gente abusa’ or ‘take advantage of’ the landowners’ kindness and generosity.

In addition to these gestures, some landowners lend property, animals, or other resources to their peons. One landowning family member described different forms of paternalism that make up labor relations on their farm:

My brother lends them a mature bull, one that is just starting out. So he lends it, they develop it, when it is finally big and has had its calves, they give it back to [him], Canuto. So there’s an advantage, why? Because Canuto doesn’t develop this animal. Get it? The neighbor develops it. They benefit from it but they give it back fat.

They gave them a farm. They have a small farm there. They gave it to them, Don Perfilio for having worked with them, for their time worked. In December, they settle [the money], they give them their bonus, their benefits and in January they start over again. They give them clothes and they throw them a party. [37:25]

As Edelman (1992) noted, writing on paternalism and relations of production/domination in the early half of the twentieth century, “landowner generosity—whether free medicine or milk or ‘concessions’ of grazing rights—was frequently instrumental rather than sincere” (104). Peons rely on the availability of labor provided by the patróns, yet their expertise in cattle herding and
working the land often surpasses the knowledge (and willingness to do the work) of the
landowners. While the \textit{patróns} understand the value of a good farmhand and will try to appease
their requests, they are nonetheless very quick to draw the line at demands because simply \textit{“hay que decir no”} or \textit{“you have to say no”} when they ask for too much. This sentiment and the
mechanism of social control reinforcing power dynamics also exist outside of the notion of
paternalistic giving. It is present in forms of everyday speech in the use of derogatory statements
or stereotypes. One such example heard frequently in Delta was how someone \textit{“se fue de noche como una nica.”} or left abruptly without any notice, a reference to the stereotype that Nicaraguan
farm hands have a tendency to disappear, quitting their job, without providing any notice to their
\textit{patrón}. This is just one example of language that reinforces a rigid hierarchical social and labor
structure in favor of the \textit{“benevolent”} employers.

As Edelman (1992) noted, writing on peon labor retention in the early twentieth century,
the \textit{hacendados} \textit{“did their best to cultivate relationships with employees and small holding
neighbors that were imbued with the seigniorial symbolism of hierarchy and domination”} (103).
This was arguably also the case in social and labor relations in Delta since as an approach, it kept
peons content while still reinforcing the status quo. In Delta, the symbolism of domination also
extended beyond farm work. It was not uncommon to see the \textit{patrón} of a farm make peons wait
before entering their homes, wait in boats while they conduct business, or request tortillas or
other labor-intensive foods from their peon’s wife. As a gesture of \textit{‘gratitude’} for their yearlong
servitude, they would be given a feast, a fiesta, and a day of leisure at the end of the year.
Figure 26. A Nicaraguan migrant family prepares the December hog, a gift from their *patrón*, during an end-of-the-year celebration in front of their home on the Rio San Juan. The men clean and skin the hog (left) and the women fry the meat using lard in a large metal pot. A game of soccer later took place to complete the festivities.

**Police-Civilian Relations**

Residents in Delta are familiar with existing on the periphery. The daily happenings of the border community occur out of sight and out of mind from the people and events in the capital city of San Jose and other centrally located regions of the country. Prior to 2010, this also meant existing almost entirely outside of the influence, surveillance, and protection of state authority and security forces. For decades, Delta residents had little to no interaction with the
state, especially in regard to law enforcement, which now includes the environmental police and border patrol. Police presence in the village consisted of two community officers who manned a rickety post on the river. It was a post where local residents, prior to the start of the conflict, would fill in for the police when they left to conduct a shift change with officers in Puerto Viejo (a roundtrip by boat could last a day or two.) When the police officer was absent, local residents would man the post, keep an eye on the people who crossed the aquatic border, and log the vessel names of the boats that came and went. Local community members also looked after the post when the local police officers went fishing or, as some people recounted, when they went over to the Nicaraguan border post to drink booze or hunt.

This shared local management of the border changed in 2010 with Pastora’s invasion of Isla Calero. The buildup in police presence that followed not only led to infrastructural development as outlined in Chapter 2, but it has also created a very new and marked disparity between the police and the community resources. Access to potable water, as previously discussed, is perhaps the most glaring example. However, other inequalities influence local residents’ opinions of the police and their understanding of what their role in the community is or should be.

The Costa Rican government sends resources to Delta for the police in the form of food, water, equipment, vehicles, and other supplies such as building materials. The border police also receive a large amount of support from the United States through the US embassy in San Jose. For example, in January of 2015, the United States donated six, new, Edwardian-brand river patrol boats to the border police operating in the aquatic frontier region in and around Delta. This gift, as reported on the US Embassy website, also included repair parts for the boats in the form of two engines, two transmissions, and six spare propellers. According to embassy reporting, the
total amount of this particular donation (aimed at strengthening Costa Rica’s borders and border security forces) was $1,127,000 US dollars.\textsuperscript{4}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image.png}
\caption{River patrol boats gifted to the Costa Rican border police by the US Embassy, as seen in Delta, Costa Rica in January of 2015}
\textit{Photo credit: Ministerio de Seguridad Publica de Costa Rica on infodefensa.com}
\end{figure}

Each police patrol boat boasts not one, but two 250-horsepower engines. This type of high-power equipment does not go unnoticed by all of the community members, including the migrant farmworkers who endure stifling poverty. The patrol boats are drastically different from the economic reality of the border in which \textit{patróns} use worn fiberglass \textit{pangas} and peons use dugout canoes. The velocity of the police boats on the water also causes conflict with local residents over wake on the river. The waves generated by the large motors have caused \textit{pangas} to bang around and break free from their securement, quickly drifting downstream toward the

\textsuperscript{4} In addition to this large gift, US Embassy Fiscal year 2012 documents showed millions of US dollars spent on Costa Rican security force training, equipment, collaborations, and assistance. Police in the border region were very aware and vocal of this support. References to arriving US support in the form of arms, supplies, and resources were overheard on multiple occasions in the region. http://www.usembassy.or.cr/cooperation/Q2_2012_ver2.htm

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ocean. In addition, the officers’ lack of knowledge of the river and its ever-shifting sand banks results in broken propellers that sit parked, broken, and out of commission at the police post in the center of Delta for all to see. The boats with damaged propellers accumulate next to a fleet of wrecked and broken-down Toyota Land Cruisers. The display of smashed police vehicles and twisted propellers is a very visible reminder of the difference between police and local residents’ resources and responsibilities. The inequalities are telling in their own right, but the misuse and mistreatment of police (and government) property contribute to community members’ impression that the border officers act frivolously, irresponsibly, and recklessly. This sentiment held by local residents can often be heard in the form of disparaging remarks or jokes about how the police, as outsiders, do not know the terrain or how to “andar en el rio” or navigate the river.

The lack of a real police effort to give back to the community in a meaningful way is another factor that contributes to the local perception that the police do not serve a purpose in the community of Delta. While it is not uncommon to see border patrol officers interacting with different community members in informal, casual, or even illicit ways, there is a clear lack of effort by the police to engage in prolonged community development efforts, social programs, or outreach activities. On isolated occasions, the police did visit the local school or donate a bicycle to a neighboring community. One school visit by police was conducted to distribute life vests to children who cross the river by canoe. The vests were provided to the local police post by the US embassy. Like all police outreach that I observed at Delta, the police contribution was an isolated, short-lived effort with no follow-up. More importantly, it was full of photo opportunities that later surfaced on Facebook and social media as ‘proof’ of community engagement that, in reality, does not exist.
In another very telling example, I asked a local police chief to donate the force’s used plastic water bottles to the school since the students were participating in a regional recycling contest. In what could have been a very symbolic and effortless act of support from the police to the school students, the police chief delivered the sacks of plastic waste with an air of indifference the day after the competition ended, ultimately not helping the students at all. On the way over to the school, the small group of border agents could be seen posing by the wheel barrel and snapping selfies in their act of “good will” and “engagement” with the local community. Instead of weighing and shipping the recycling materials out of the border region on the recycling truck that came as part of the school program, the large sacks of plastic recyclables sat in the corridor of the old schoolhouse for months as there are no municipal sanitation services that come to Delta to pick up garbage or recycling.

These examples, coupled with the lack of planned, sustainable community initiatives, show why some residents share the following remarks about the local police force.

_Bueno para la comunidad es sí muy poco. Porque es muy poco? El trabajo de la policía el problema es que lo han confundido. El trabajo de la policía tiene que ser comunitaria. Y en esta policía que tenemos nosotros de frontera... se ha confundido mucho la ayuda policial. Porque antes el policía era comunitario. Y ahora dificilmente usted ve un policía colaborando en la comunidad. Diay cuando yo trabajé en las épocas de la Guardia Rural usted veía un policía remendando las carreteras, usted veía un policía dando clases, usted veía un policía con los niños de escuela y ahora dificilmente los ve, porque han cambiado mucho el sistema administrativo. Ha sido totalmente distinto ahora a como era antes. [13:00]_

Well, for the community, it is very little [what the police do]. Why is it so little? The problem is that they have confused police work. Police work has to be communal. And with these border police that we have...they have very much confused [the role] of police support. Because, before, the police were communal [community-based]. And now it is difficult to see the police collaborating in or with the community. Heck, when I worked in the era of the Rural Guard, you would see police fixing the roads, you would see police giving classes, you would see police with the school children. And now, it is difficult to see that. Because the administrative system has changed a lot. It has been totally different now from how it was before. [13:00]
This particular border resident of Costa Rican nationality shares a unique perspective because he previously served in the Guardia de Asistencia Rural or Rural Assistance Guard before it was absorbed in a series of reforms from 1994-1996,\(^5\) into the Fuerza Publica or National Police Force. He then worked as an officer in the Fuerza Publica before retiring in 2010. His remarks about the role of the police in Delta are especially meaningful because he once participated in the types of rural development projects he would like to see in his community. His comments also underscored that policing previously consisted of this type of service and he knew it to be effective in building good relations with the community.

Beginning in 2010, the police presence in Delta was rapidly increasing with unfamiliar faces from centrally located regions with their eye on Nicaragua and not on serving the local community. Regardless of police-community agendas, programs for social inclusion, and preventative violence initiatives that took place on a national level in other parts of the country (Moretti 2015), the border residents of Delta were nothing more than the backdrop to the nation’s highest security “threat.” The police were not sent to Delta to focus on the community. They were sent to the border because of the dispute, and their regard for and interactions with the local residents reflect that. The border police’s interaction with the local community was, at best, a superficial, one-way street of generous acts uploaded to social media for good publicity. At worst, it was either non-existent or structured around clandestine exchanges of state goods/resources with local patróns, a theme discussed further in the following chapter.

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\(^5\) This includes the 1994 passing of the Ley General de Policía (Law No. 7410) which solidified police work as a career through new labor laws and the 1995 unification of two government ministries to form the Ministerio de Gobernación, Policía y Seguridad Pública as it is known today. [http://www.seguridadpublica.go.cr/ministerio/documentos/historia_msp.pdf](http://www.seguridadpublica.go.cr/ministerio/documentos/historia_msp.pdf) accessed 07/13/17
Police-Migrant Relations

The relationship between the border police and the migrant population in Delta is difficult to summarize in a straightforward and all-encompassing statement. These two entities interact in a very nuanced web of interpersonal behaviors, interactions, attitudes, and beliefs that are influenced by factors such as authority, power, socioeconomic status, nationality, language, and race, to name a few. Observations and collected interview data point to larger themes that characterize and underscore the complex ways these two population groups exist in relation to one another.

A humanitarian focus in policing. One recurring theme in discussions with police about migrants was the reference to humanitarian principles invoked by the border police in both rhetoric and action. Due to the dire economic situation and marginalized social position of the migrant population, most border police in the region empathize, to some extent, with the members of this group. This is especially the case in Delta with the Nicaraguan migrants who live and work there.

In 2011, when tensions were high between Costa Rica and Nicaragua, I accompanied a group of police officers on a 19-kilometer border surveillance excursion during which we hiked through knee-deep swamplands and the tropical jungle of Isla Calero. As we walked, led by the police chief of the Barra del Colorado post, we passed by the remote houses (of primarily Nicaraguan migrants) that line the banks of the Rio San Juan on the Costa Rican side of the border. The police stopped at each of the houses to speak with the occupants. I observed several of these migrant families offer food or coffee to the police as they passed by. On other occasions, I heard the migrants apologize that they did not have a pot of soup prepared or other aliment to offer the police who were out conducting the patrol. After repeatedly declining the generous
favors at multiple homesteads, the police chief turned to me, and referring to the migrants as “gente humilde” and “pobrecitos” (humble and poor people), he stated that the police never accept their offerings. This is not because it is viewed as problematic to accept gifts or offers from the public in the border region, but rather because the families on the border have so few resources and are so poor. Due to his rank as police chief, his respectful actions serve as a model of behavior toward migrants that sets a standard for police-migrant relations among his officers. Further, his outlook is not unique to other behavior I observed of the police.

His empathic position extends further than simply turning down food items. He also remarked that he does not bother asking for identification or migration documentation from these individuals. There are several reasons for this. First, and from a pragmatic standpoint, he already knows who does and does not have legal status or papers to be in the country (a topic discussed later in this chapter). Second, it is in the police officers’ best interest to maintain good relations with border residents who can inform them of happenings or Sandinista movements on the other side of the border. In addition to this, there is no reason to draw attention to or aggravate this impoverished population because they do not have the financial means to obtain documentation or valid forms of identification either in Costa Rica or their home country, a process that requires expensive travel to Managua or San Carlos, Nicaragua. The migrant population is accepted as undocumented and viewed as families who are merely trying to eke out an existence in the harsh environment of the river basin. As long as they are not causing problems, the police do not bother the migrant population or ask for identification or immigration papers.

Furthermore, the border policing initiatives during the conflict were centered on monitoring drug trafficking and surveilling potential Sandinista encroachment on Costa Rican territory. Undocumented Nicaraguan migrants living on the Costa Rican side of the border
simply were not a priority. The formal interactions between the police and migrants were neither negative nor positive but rather quite minimal and brief. Migrants who reside in Delta do not experience formal encounters with the police on a regular basis. On the rare occasions that they do, such as these surveillance excursions when they meet in a formal policing capacity, they are not hostile or antagonistic encounters. Although none of the migrants that I interviewed expressed fear when I asked about the police, the migrant population also does not seek the police out for official inquiries or help. This is to such an extent that, even in extreme scenarios such as a domestic violence, the police are not called. In a case that was observed in the field, the wife of a peon was being abused and, in a fearful moment of rage, she called on an influential local *patrón*. Similarly, it was the *patrón* who mediated the situation. The *patrón* also did not defer to, inform, or call the police. This example speaks as much to the lack of relations between the police and the migrant community as it does to *hacendado* paternalism and the close ties between landowners and the migrant workers.

Beyond the telling actions and words of the police chief in 2011, other examples point to the existence of a top-down discourse emphasizing humanitarian and pacifist values in security and policing in Costa Rica. This overarching principle in policing is directly related to Costa Rican national history and identity—more specifically, the notion of an early peaceful agrarian democracy and later the 1948 abolishment of the Costa Rican standing army. In fact, this act by President Jose Figueres Ferrer to abolish the army and the military spirit in Costa Rica is arguably the most profound factor in influencing a humanitarian discourse within the national structure of policing.

There have been many shifts of varying degree and foci since 1948. The most recent strategic initiative implemented in 2011 is the *Plan Nacional de Prevencion de la Violencia* or
the National Violence Prevention Plan, which was introduced by the Óscar Arias Sánchez administration. Serving as his Vice-President and Minister of Justice, Laura Chinchilla penned the following opening paragraph in her introduction to the 2007-2010 version of the plan:

Los costarricenses somos conocidos en el mundo como personas pacíficas y tolerantes, porque las relaciones que mantenemos, entre nosotros mismos y con otros pueblos, se sustentan en valores de paz, respeto y comprensión. Con base en estos valores hemos construido una cultura que nos permite resolver, gran parte de nuestras diferencias, mediante el diálogo y el respeto a la institucionalidad; lo que nos afirma como una de las más antiguas democracias de América Latina. Esos mismos valores hicieron posible que tomáramos la trascendental decisión de abolir el ejército y de eliminar el autoritarismo de nuestra vida política.... Aunque los costarricenses hemos asumido la paz, el respeto y la comprensión como valores propios, consustanciales a nuestra idiosincrasia y a nuestro estilo de vida, es hora de hacer un alto en el camino para preguntarnos si aún está vigente esa noble condición.

Costa Ricans are known in the world as peaceful and tolerant people, because the relationships we maintain, among ourselves and with other peoples, are based on values of peace, respect and understanding. Based on these values, we have built a culture that allows us to resolve a large part of our differences, through dialogue and respect for institutionality; what affirms us as one of the oldest democracies in Latin America. Those same values made it possible for us to take the momentous decision to abolish the army and eliminate the authoritarianism of our political life .... Although we Costa Ricans have assumed peace, respect and understanding as our own values, consubstantial to our idiosyncrasy and our lifestyle, it is time to stop and ask if this noble condition is still in force?

This nationalistic introduction written by Chinchilla while serving as Minister of Justice distinctly defined and related Costa Rican values of peace, respect, tolerance, and compassion to notions of security—not only in the reference to abolishing the army, but specifically in regard to maintaining these ideals in light of rising violence and insecurity. She was able to draw on these deep-rooted, nationalistic values to advance the new directives in policing in Costa Rica.

Whether in macro-level nationalistic discourses or direct police initiatives on the ground, this pacifist streak of exceptionalism vividly permeates the conceptualization of policing in Costa Rica. Even new, rank-and-file border patrol officers spoke of a similar orientation during interviews conducted in 2015. When I asked one officer why he thought there were such
differences between how police and migrants interact on the US-Mexico border and the Costa
Rica-Nicaragua border, he responded:

[6:20] Si no, eso se lleva primero a los derechos humanos que existe aquí en Costa Rica. Entonces, por parte de nosotros, nosotros no podemos violentar eso, porque para nosotros los perjudica. Inclusive si nosotros maltratamos a alguien como se hace en Estados Unidos más bien hasta presos podemos ir a dar por los derechos humanos. Aquí en Costa Rica no se ve la violencia a si sea criminal así no sea criminal. Siempre respetando los derechos humanos de cada nacionalidad no hablemos de Estados y Nicaraguanes. Lo vemos ahora con los Cubanos, la alcahuetura [alcahuetear]. Para mí es una alcahuetura que se hace aquí. Más bien debería ser más estricto diría yo, pero Costa Rica no es así.

[6:20] Yes, this primarily has to do with the human rights that exist here in Costa Rica. So, on our part, we can’t violate that because for us its harmful. If we mistreat someone like they do in the United States, rather, they could throw us in jail for human rights violations. Here in Costa Rica you don’t see the violence like that whether it is criminal or not criminal. We are always respecting human rights of every nationality, let’s not even talk about Americans or Nicaraguans. You can see it now with the Cubans, the leniency. To me, it’s over the top [exaggerated]. Better yet, I think we should be stricter, but Costa Rica isn’t like that.

It is interesting to hear a border patrol officer (a state agent charged with protecting the nation’s boundaries) nonchalantly say that Costa Rica just ‘isn’t like that.’ From his perspective, Costa Rica as a nation is very tolerant, accepting, and non-violent toward migrants, not only from Nicaragua or expats from the United States, but from any country. In his statement, he referenced the Cuban migrant situation\(^6\) to illustrate the extent to which he believed foreigners who are in the country without permission or with expired papers really have it well in Costa Rica. He, in fact, believed that Costa Rica should enforce stricter immigration laws. The local police officer’s choice of the word alcahuetear to describe the way migrants are treated by Costa Rican law enforcement implies great leniency, to the point of saying that the migrants have it too

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\(^6\) Roughly 5,000 Cuban migrants, seeking passage to the United States in late 2015, were stranded in Costa Rica when Nicaragua and Guatemala refused to allow transit of the group northward. The Costa Rican government provided shelter, food, and some medical attention for an extended period to the migrants. [http://www.cnn.com/2015/12/10/americas/costa-rica-stranded-cuban-migrants/index.html](http://www.cnn.com/2015/12/10/americas/costa-rica-stranded-cuban-migrants/index.html)
good or even are spoiled. Ultimately, though, he determined that a stricter approach was not the Costa Rican way. As I sat listening to his comments, still appearing perplexed that the border police maintain amicable relations with “illegal” migrants, he struggled to try and explain this conundrum.

[7:18] Es que Costa Rica, no me acuerdo en que año este, se reunió los derechos humanos. Inclusive yo creo que Costa Rica es el centro de los derechos humanos de países, después que se...es que no me acuerdo ahora bien, pero sí, sí es por ahí viene.

[7:18] The thing is, Costa Rica… I don’t remember in what year, they assembled human rights. In addition, I think Costa Rica is the center of the human rights of all countries. After that... I do not remember right now, but yes…that is where it comes from.

As can be seen above, the border patrol officer falls short in his explanation to identify the origin of these practices. Rather, his statement shows that this standard comes from the top-down and is embedded in the culture of how policing is conducted and understood. Regardless of the veracity of his claim that Costa Rica is the global leader in human rights, what is worth noting is how he connected this understanding directly to his policing philosophy and practices. He attributed the positive dynamic of police-migrant relations in Delta to an idealized nationalistic tendency to support and promote human rights. Interestingly, later in the interview, I asked him what he liked best about working in Delta. I thought he might respond with a reference to the population or location on the border. Instead, he requested that I stop the audio recording. I did as he asked and waited for his response. He proceeded to say that it was the best post because it was easy and the police did not have to do anything. They did not have to walk-the-beat or interact much with the public as police in more urban areas do. His words and my observations in the region suggested that for some police officers, the “emphasis” on human rights in regard to not enforcing immigration policies or strictly policing the migrant population might have just as much to do with being lazy or ser vago than it does with notions of tolerance.
or equality. Ultimately, it is likely a combination of low policing priorities, a humanitarian emphasis, and the lack of wanting to carry out extra work that leads to low interactions with the migrant peon population.

Police (non)action with migrant population. With these factors in mind, providing the context to formal policing endeavors and expectations in Delta, the following section aims to illuminate the informal dynamics of police-migrant relations by examining the actions and non-actions in everyday police encounters. The police are a very visible social entity in Delta. While formal interactions are sparse among the police and migrants, they did in fact engage on an informal level. Throughout the course of this research, observed police and migrant interactions were amicable, jovial, and carefree. Police-migrant relations in Delta are defined by everyday, informal behaviors and interactions. These are not encounters with the state or even related to policing. Simply stated, they are human encounters.

At least several nights a week (and oftentimes more frequently), members of the border police would spend the evening hours in the general store. There they would buy cigarettes or snacks, cook, eat, drink, and hang out alongside migrant workers and other locals who were finishing their day of work or winding down over a bottle of cacique. It was commonplace to see border police socialize, drink, eat, dance, and joke with Nicaraguan migrants and Costa Rican patróns on a regular basis. During nights when the regional Costa Rican soccer games were broadcast on television, police and locals (peons and patróns alike) would gather in front of the only TV set to cheer for their teams. Shouts and hollers would ring out along the river basin when a goal was scored. On a day-to-day basis, informal interactions between the border patrol and migrants in the community are nonchalant, peaceful, and friendly.
Figure 28. A typical night in the kitchen of the general store in which border police, migrants and patrons socialize, eat, drink, watch TV and unwind.

It is not simply the actions of the police and their tendency to mingle with migrant community members that contributed to a carefree atmosphere between the two groups. Equally important as their actions are their non-actions which contribute to an unspoken understanding of the migrant situation in Delta. There existed a confidence in the community, both among the migrants and the patróns (who did not want to lose their workers), that the police would not apprehend or deport community members or conduct raids, even in opportune moments. During
special events such as the *cabalgata* or when the Red Cross came to hand out emergency aid, the police did not seize the opportunity to question the migrants or publicly display their authority. This type of behavior or conduct intended to intimidate or incite fear was never observed.

Perhaps the most telling example was the complete lack of a police presence or enforcement response during a publicized migrant information session that was held in Delta to assist local undocumented families to understand their legal status and potential options for obtaining valid paperwork. The event was sponsored by a non-government organization from San Jose, known as *Servicio Jesuita para Migrantes Costa Rica*, who came to the community and provided free legal consultations over a two-day period. Some migrants in attendance inquired about the necessary steps to obtain a valid *cedula* or identification. Others had questions about obtaining legal work documentation or soliciting Costa Rican residency. In a few cases, when eligible through family or marriage ties, migrant individuals were counseled on the correct steps to obtain Costa Rican citizenship. The interest and attendance at the event superseded expectation. Over fifty families, from Delta and beyond, came to seek advice on their individual situations according to the identification and migratory status. The migrants lined up and waited for hours to have a consultation and get answers concerning their paperwork and status.

Prior to the event, representatives from the NGO and local community leaders discussed whether such an event would draw the attention of the border police, ultimately putting the participants at risk. Inviting the most vulnerable portion of the local population under one roof (with all of their identification in hand) and within a few hundred feet of the border police post was a potentially risky endeavor. Based on the lack of interest in community events by the police in the past and strong encouragement from local leaders, the decision was made to hold the event.
Figure 29. Nicaraguan migrant workers and their families line up at an information session led by Servicio Jesuita para Migrantes in the border community of Delta, Costa Rica on October 11, 2015. The two-day event was carried out with no questioning or interference from the Costa Rican border patrol.

An announcement was hung on the shutters of the general store, a centrally located and visible space where community information is typically posted and all can see. Text messages were circulated to local families. On the day of the event, flyers and signs were hung and unmistakable commotion and boat traffic ensued. It is impossible that this event went unnoticed by the police. In the end, an event geared toward and hosting dozens of ‘illegal’ migrants attracted no police presence and no questioning before, during, or after the fact. Furthermore, no attempt was made to obtain the list of participants or other identifying information of the migrants.
This non-action is important for several reasons. First, the indifference on behalf of the border patrol sheds light on policing priorities in the community. As I previously stated, the capture and deportation of undocumented migrants who reside in and around Delta is not a top concern. Second, the successful execution of the event and the fact that nearly every migrant family from Delta and some surrounding villages made the decision to come despite the risk also speaks to a certain level of trust in the police on behalf of the migrant community. However, their trust of the police should not be confused with a willingness to seek out the police or police services in a formal capacity. This suggests that there may be minimal fear or a cultural reluctance regarding the police and their efforts. The Costa Rican *patróns* who planned the event also expressed great confidence in police-migrant relations. For the *patróns*, holding the event meant running the risk of potentially losing their labor force. This is significant because it reveals an unspoken understanding between the three groups. The *patróns* were certain there would be no issue with the police, and the migrants likewise showed up trusting that there would not be a problem with the authorities.

The notion of a peaceful co-existence between migrants and border police out of respect for human rights surfaces in many conversations about migrant relations and lifestyles within the larger Costa Rican context. At first glance, this humanitarian emphasis seems to explain the rather favorable conditions between migrants and the police. In some scenarios, this very well may be the case, especially compared to other more violent or draconian border regions throughout the world. However, it should also be noted that a major part of the process to render and respect human rights is recognizing the humanity in people or seeing people as people. The Costa Rican border patrol agents view the migrants who live in Delta as part of the community because of the sheer fact that they work there. They see them as part and parcel of the
community, not as outsiders. This distinction of seeing them as integral to the community is based on the labor they provide. This has more to do with familiarity than protecting landowners’ access to labor.

The border police know many of the migrants. If they do not know them on a first-name basis, they know their faces, where they reside and/or for whom they work. They view the migrant workers as an integral part of the community and do not hesitate to greet them/shake hands with them, share liquor and food, or socialize with them. The migrants are not considered ‘others,’ but rather people who fulfill a particular labor niche and position in the local economy and community. They are viewed as belonging to and being an integral part of the community. This understanding, however, does not afford the same respect as other community members and Nicaraguan migrants are often spoken down upon or mocked in jokes.

Similarly, Delta is not a migrant utopia where all Nicaraguans are welcome. Early in the course of my research, I learned that the border police had apprehended a group of roughly twenty migrants on the road that leads to Delta. They had just arrived by boat and all had their belongings in tow. The police did not recognize them as individuals who live or work in the area and they determined from their bags that they had just crossed into Costa Rica. It was further evident that they were unfamiliar with the region because all of the border residents (Costa Ricans and Nicaraguans alike) know how to evade the Costa Rican border police and Nicaraguan immigration post using clandestine trails or border crossings. Anyone familiar with the area would have known that the police monitor the *trocha* but would never venture down to patrol the dirt trail that runs along the river bank. For this reason, it was apparent they were outsiders and they likely had crossed with a coyote. Had a local resident crossed them in their boat, they would have told them this valuable information and dropped them somewhere safe.
The border police brought the group back to Delta where they spent the night in the abandoned building next to the general store. When the border patrol officers came into the kitchen to inform the owner of the apprehension in a private conversation, they asked for some sodas and snacks to give to the detained migrants. The owner and another patrón went to make sure the police had provided them food and they returned again later to check on the group. They were also likely checking to make sure they were not people they knew or could vouch for. In the early morning, when I left to go to the school, the group was already gone. I was told that they were taken to Los Chiles, Costa Rica where they would be released to cross back into Nicaragua at the Las Tablillas border crossing.

The apprehension of this group of Nicaraguan migrants illustrates that the border police do conduct vigilance patrols of the border and they will perform immigration duties such as detention and deportation. This case illustrates other significant dynamics as well. The fact that the police detained these undocumented migrants, when such a large percentage of the local
population is openly known to be undocumented, begs the question of to whom and when does the law apply. The answer to this question sheds light on how a border identity and community belonging is defined in Delta and by the police.

Like immigrants in most locales throughout the world, the migrants in Delta fulfill a labor niche that Costa Rican landowners need and are not willing to do themselves. What becomes interesting in this case is that the border police take into account a migrant’s rootedness in the community in deciding how and when to apply the law. I pondered the irony of this situation for months as an outsider. It struck me as odd that after witnessing the apprehension of these migrants, the same border police were informally eating dinner at the same table as undocumented Nicaraguans who somehow ‘belonged’ to Delta.

When I asked two officers during an interview how this could be the case, or how they justified arresting some migrants and not others, their responses were accompanied by a long pause. It was as if to say, “Why was I asking such an obvious question?” Since I was genuinely confused and interested in how they conceptualized this difference, I stared back waiting for a response. They finally answered in a matter-of-fact form:

 Quienes son ilegales y quienes no? Diay, no. Se echa de ver. Se echa de ver, ya el emigrante que esta entrando al pais, entonces por ahi es que uno echa de ver. No es comun. Mas que uno trabaja en la zona, ya esta fijo uno sabe quienes viven en la zona, quienes son de lugares cercano y quienes ingresan. Siempre ellos traen maletas. [8:54]

Who are the illegal ones and who aren’t? Well, you just look. [It’s clear] You just look. The migrant that is just entering the country, you can just tell. It’s not a common thing. Even more so when one works in the region, it is firm [obvious] who lives in the zone and who is from the surrounding areas and who is coming in. They always carry suitcases. [8:54]

The reality is such that local border agents pick and choose, selectively, when, where, and to whom the law applies. The migrants who were just arriving to Costa Rica were apprehended and deported, yet the same border officers drink, socialize, and otherwise do not bother migrants
with roots in the community, even though they may have the same legal status, linguistic dialect, or nationality. In Delta, determining who is and is not “legal” has nothing to do with immigration papers. Instead, they evaluate if the individual lives and works in the region. They look for a familiar face and someone who fits the look of a rural farm laborer—in other words, not carrying suitcases.

This seemingly haphazard application of the law is not specific to the Costa Rica-Nicaragua border. Other scholars have noted the diverse forms in which power and authority can be exercised, experienced, and manifested through state apparatuses in interstitial spaces such as at international geopolitical border zones (Grygar 2006). Kalir and Sur (2012) referred to this as “implementation deficiency” or the state’s inability (due to lack of manpower, resources or even the lack of state officials’ will) to effectivity or equally turn policies into practice. In this same light, the task of enforcing Costa Rican immigration law is not only massive, but also completely impossible due to the capacity and resources of the Costa Rican border police. To manage this discrepancy, the police officers’ remarks and their behaviors show that Nicaraguan migrants are thus divided into two distinct groups in Delta. There are migrants who “belong” who have roots in the community, meaning they live and work there; and then those who do not, who are newcomers and do not have labor ties. These distinctions are made and enforced irrelevant of one’s legal status or possession of papers.
CHAPTER 6: COMMUNITY ACTION—THE GRAN CABALGATA

Having distinguished the different social entities present in Delta and the broader parameters that define intergroup social relations, Chapter 6 focuses on specific ethnographic examples recorded during the planning, organization, and execution of the gran cabalgata, the largest and most significant communal event observed during field work. Since most daily social interactions in Delta take place within the intimacy and privacy of the domestic unit, either on individual farms or within their homes, when the community congregated for events or meetings, it was an exceptional opportunity to observe the unfolding of social roles and relationships. Perhaps the best example of this is the annual horseback riding event, known as the “Gran Cabalgata Delta 2015,” that was hosted by the local Development Association, La Asociación de Desarrollo Integral Las Vegas del San Juan. It was the largest event held in Delta over the course of the research period and the preparation leading up to the event and the celebration itself provided invaluable insight into social groupings and relations in Delta. In this chapter, I describe the efforts and events leading up to and culminating in the cabalgata, as these ethnographic moments illustrate themes (power, authority, and outside connections) outlined in the previous chapter.

Organizing the Event

The Gran Cabalgata took months to plan. It was envisioned as a fundraising event to benefit the Development Association and the local school board. The proceeds would be split, fifty-fifty, between the two beneficiaries. The Development Association planned to give their half of the earnings to a San Carleño absentee landowner in exchange for a vacant lot and a rundown building located next to the general store that they would use for communal purposes. The association hoped to unite their entire organization, including their office, petty cash, and
archives, under one roof. The local school board (comprised of mainly the same members as the Development Association) would spend their half of the earnings on a new fencing project that the municipality would jointly fund.

Geographically speaking, the boundaries of the area served by the Development Association stretched beyond Delta along *las vegas* or the river valley of the Rio San Juan to the small village of Fatima, which is 15 kilometers west of Delta and roughly an hour drive by car. All but one of the members of the association, however, lived in Delta. In the village of Fatima, the Development Association owned the decrepit remains of an old wooden rodeo bullring. During an association meeting, they made the decision to tear down the structure in Fatima and haul the wood in trucks back to Delta. They would salvage the wood that was not rotted and use it to build a *galerón*, or a large hall, behind the soon-to-be-acquired community building. The new structure would host the horseback riding event.

It was not long before work was underway. Construction sounds rang out through Delta. Most of the local landowners “*mandaron* peons” or sent one of their workers to provide the labor for the construction tasks. Sending a peon for a community project (whether it be cutting grass at the school or fixing potholes in the road) measures a landowner’s commitment to the community and the project. This type of labor lending is expected and *patróns* who do not contribute are considered bad or irresponsible patrons. The peon serves as a stand-in for their boss, representing the *patrón’s* contribution. In this particular case, with the tearing down of the bullring in Fatima, roughly six male peons participated in the work which was overseen by one of the local *patróns*. They used his vehicle to transport the salvageable wood, hauling it down the border road, then redepositing it in Delta in front of the school. From there, they stripped the nails, sorted the lumber into piles according to size and quality, then returned for more.
This went on for several days. Since Delta is a tiny village, the buzz of the workers, vehicles and resources did not go unnoticed. In fact, it drew the attention of the police who could view the activities from their post. At the time of the observation recorded below, there were no workers removing nails from the large pile of lumber on the road. From the school, I watched as the following scenario unfolded.

Field Notes 5/19

The kids were starting to complain that they were hungry and it was after 11:00am. Flaca came over to tell us that the food was ready. On her way over she ran into two police officers who had just come from in front of the school and taken a 2x4 piece of wood from the used lumber pile the men had been bringing in from Fatima. Verde watched them take it and then laughed when they walked right into Flaca. We could see her in the distance scolding them.
When she arrived to the school she was angry. Verde asked if they had asked her permission to use the wood. She said, No! He said he wasn’t sure if they had already spoken with her and that's why he didn't stop them from taking the wood. Flaca proceeded to badmouth the police saying how they steal things. She told the 2 cops that if they need something to ask her. She said, she's the junta [president of the school board] and on the association [Development Association]. They replied back to her, but it's just one 2x4. Verde responded, “Yah, but what happens if you go over to their [the police's] stuff and take something? You can't just say, oh it is only one.” Flaca scoffed and said, “Y ellos cuidan aqui? Ja! Soy la policia aqui, yo cuido todo. Que cuidan ellos?” [Trans. “And they take care of this place? Ha! I am the police here. I look after everything. What do they look after?] The two police officers were rank-and-file officers with little experience in Delta. They most likely thought that the pile of wood was garbage and left for abandon. To any outsider, the pile of wood would have appeared to be trash. The wood was old, faded, warped, broken, thrown about, and left sitting in the street. However, in Delta, this is an extremely valuable resource and the community was making do with the very limited resources available. In Delta, wood is repurposed and reused to the greatest extent possible since it is illegal to cut down trees within the confines of the national wildlife reserve within which Delta is located. Understanding the extent to which materials are reused and repurposed is something one learns over time in Delta. The officers did not understand this reality, especially as it pertains to wood, nor could they be expected to as the government provides for nearly all of their needs. By going over and taking the wood from the community association’s lumber pile, without permission (especially considering the substantially greater resources of the police), it is at best the police showing little regard for the economic reality of the community. At its worst, it is the police stealing from the local Development Association. It was not uncommon to hear stories recounted by landowners complaining about how police officers steal. Some spoke of how officers would steal chickens, taking several home with them in sacks when they rotated out of the border region at the end of their eight-day shifts. Other residents complained of speeding police patrol units on the border road that ran over and killed dogs and cattle. These incidents,
however, generally resulted in a verbal complaint at the police post and, for the most part, were begrudgingly tolerated by the community.

Flaca, after a quick lecture on taking things that do not belong to another, let the police officers continue on their way with the wood in hand. Frustrated by what had happened, she later ridiculed the role of the police in Delta and suggested that she looks after things better than they do. She proclaimed, “I am the police here! I take care of everything. What do the police look after here?” Her response to this scenario was spurred by catching the officers “in the act” of taking the wood, but it also reflected some of the property owners’ general attitudes toward the police in Delta. The illegality of natural resources extraction and utilization and access to land in Delta weighs heavily on all residents, although it disproportionately affects the patróns who rely on their land for resources. Therefore, construction projects and clearing farmland are carried out clandestinely to avoid alerting the border and environmental police. With the construction of the galerón for the horseback riding event, the visibility of the project brought questions about resources and land to the forefront.

It was this reason that the local Development Association’s relationship with the police chief of one squadron came to a head several days later. That particular afternoon, the old squadron was rotating out of the post at Delta and the officers of the second group were arriving to relieve them. As we were pulling out in a packed car to go pick maize from a neighbor’s farm, Flaca unexpectedly jumped out of the vehicle to speak with two men whom I did not recognize. I asked the other passengers who they were. I learned that they were from the muni, or municipality located in Puerto Viejo de Sarapiqui. It was rare to see someone from the municipality in Delta, considering the long trip from Puerto Viejo. As we looked on, waiting, we watched Flaca exaggeratingly point and gesture in the direction of the construction site. We
could tell there was a problem with the new galerón. When she finally got back in the car, she angrily vented, telling us all what had just unfolded:

Field Notes 5/21

Flaca explained to the municipality that they are storing the wood because it’d be a shame to lose it all. She said they couldn’t keep it by the street because people would steal it and it couldn’t go in any other location because the land was too wet and it would rot. So she said they are putting it behind Flaca’s house [under a roofed structure for storage].

Flaca said one of the people that came from the muni was a conocido (someone she knows). He asked her when they were going to go fishing and he gave her the benefit of the doubt. It was he who told her that the Macha (the police chief of Squadron A) formally denounced the Development Association for building without permission on government land.

Flaca was livid and she told the man from the municipality that the police were building something too! And to boot, that they were stealing wood from the very pile that belonged to the association! Flaca gave me a fist bump and slurped her lips in delight ¡Que delicia, mai! [How delicious, man!] Then she burst out in laughter.

After the encounter, she called the president of the association. She yelled at him for telling the Macha about the galerón plans. Since nothing had even been built yet, she asked him how the Macha knew what the association was going to build? She told him not to tell the Macha the association’s plans because they can’t trust her. Then she cut the phone. Flaca said, you can’t trust the police, you have to be good with them but you can’t be a sapo [snitch] either.

A few minutes later she got a message from a national security agent asking if she could find them a boat and a botero [boat driver] to take them to Barra del Colorado. Flaca isn’t good at texting so she asked me to type the response. She began her dictation, “Con gusto...” or “With pleasure...”

This interesting encounter very clearly represents the struggle for authority that exists between the Costa Rican patróns and police/security personnel. Flaca knew exactly how to present the association’s agenda to the municipality. She completely downplayed the construction project, framing the structure as a large storage shed instead of a party hall. She made it a point to not mention that they were planning a huge event. This type of deception is typical in the border region. Residents know how to fly under the radar of government authorities, both local and regional. As another community member once explained to me, “todo
In other words, one does everything camouflaged, from cutting the trees to splitting the wood to doing the construction.

In this example with the municipality, Flaca was able to rely on her social connections to people in power within the municipal government. By drawing on her role in the Development Association, she was able to appeal to the community’s best interest and protect the wood (a valuable resource that belongs to the people). Her argument was simple. How could the police denounce the very community they are tasked to serve, especially for such a mundane reason? To add salt to the wound, she questioned the hypocrisy of the border patrol agents’ actions as they had in fact stolen some of this very wood that the Macha had filed a complaint about!

She then phoned the landowner who she learned shared the sensitive information with the Macha, one of the police chiefs. She expressed anger that he would potentially sabotage their project in such a fashion. He had broken an understood code of ethics about what information to offer up to the police—particularly ones like Macha whom they could not trust. In her opinion (and the rest of the passengers in the car), he had acted like a snitch. When she hung up, her expression epitomized how many local landowners manage relations with the police. One has to be good with them, treat them with respect, and be helpful to a certain extent. At the same time, she conveyed her lack of complete trust in the police and how one cannot just roll over and give them anything they ask for.

A telling example of walking this fine line came to light several moments later when a National Security agent texted her personal cell phone and asked if she could help arrange transportation down to Barra del Colorado. Providing rides to destinations further inland is an easy way for locals with a boat to make a little bit of extra money. However, without the help of
Flaca as an intermediary, it would be difficult for National Security to find the right person to carry out such a task. As this series of events displays, different police and security personnel maintain different types of relationships with local *patróns*. A certain closeness exists between some officers and local landowners that is based on an understood level of cooperation, exchange, favors, and looking the other way. These relationships developed between individuals with roots in the region and are represented in a familiarity with how things ought to work in the border region. The other *patrón* who told the police chief the Association’s construction plans broke this understanding because he shared too much information with the police and it happened to be with the Macha, one officer in particular who chooses not to participate in this local understanding of authority. As a result, the Macha clashed more frequently with the community. This tension came to a head when the Macha showed up at a Development Association meeting once her police squadron returned to Delta.

**Field Notes 5/28**

*About halfway through the association meeting, the Macha and another officer showed up. She brought a copy of the informe [report] that she had sent to the municipality. She said she wanted it to be clear that she did not denounce the association but that she sent an informe or report because that is her job. She said, in her defense, that she spoke with Puriscal, the president of the association, before she sent the document and that she told him to also send one so that the municipality had both sides. She said she was trying to be clear by telling Puriscal that she was sending it. The Macha declared to the junta that the copy in her hand was exactly what she sent to the municipality, so people don’t need to call her ‘un sapo’ or a snitch. Flaca interrupted her by raising her hand and saying, “Excuse me, but I know you’re directly talking about me and yes, I did say that you were a sapo because it isn’t right for you to denounce the community, after all one does... [Other association members chimed in, in what became an extremely heated argument.] Eventually Flaca, who was agitated and wincing said that’s never how things were done here because every time they went to the muni for permission for anything, they were told no because they don’t have titles. But, she repeated, we have possession rights.*

The details of what and why she turned in the report to the municipality where really of no interest to the community leaders. What mattered more was that she submitted a report
showing that she operated according to a different set of rules. Those rules were an unwavering obedience to security protocol, even when the act in question was a beneficial community project in a marginalized, poor, and rural border community.

This encounter during the organizing phase of the *cabalgata* illuminates the way authority functions in Delta. The *patróns* disapprove and clash with state authorities who are not willing to yield some power to the community. The statement “*Yo soy la policia aquí*” made by a local *patrón* is a clear example of this power struggle. It is not uncommon to hear *patróns* in Delta proclaim that they are the true protectors of the border region because it was their presence, especially during the height of the conflict, that prevented the encroaching of Nicaraguans (both migrant squatters and Sandinista military personnel) on Costa Rican territory. Also, as the confrontation with the female police chief exhibits, the close connections that *patróns* maintain with municipal government figures supersedes any threat the young police chief poses. According to the *patróns*, a good approach for dealing with the police is to make good with them, to cooperate, but not to be a snitch. Furthermore, favors like helping members of National Security secure boat transportation can lead to material benefits down the line. For example, I learned that one member of National Security gifted an encyclopedia set to the local school at the request of a *patrón*. Staying in the good grace of state security figures is an important strategy, in terms of material benefits and information. While *patróns* tell some information to the police, they do not recount everything. Sensitive information about drugs, clandestine tilling of trees, or Sandinista politics that reach Delta are examples of topics that are not shared with police or security personnel.

After the municipality left, no further actions were taken to stop or halt the construction. The report that was filed by the Macha accomplished nothing more than bad police-community
relations. The *patróns* continued their meetings and planning of the *cabalgata*. They made calls to arrange the music, food, donations, gas, boats for transportation down the river, and female workers to come and cook, clean, decorate, and serve the food. There was still a lot of work to be done.

**Building the Galerón**

The completion of the *galerón* in a few weeks’ time required the collective action of the community. The plan involved transforming an overgrown field into an event hall with a bar, bathrooms, electricity, a sitting area, a place for a DJ, and decorations within a three-week timeframe. The Development Association also decided to renovate the decrepit house beside the general store so it could be used as a kitchen and additional seating area. The abandoned house belonged to a land owner from San Carlos who was donating the building to the Association. Part of the reason for the renovation was to recommission the building for Development Association use. Previously, the building was used by the police as temporary living quarters. It was later used to provide living accommodations for the local school teacher. With the building under the Association’s care, it would be used for community purposes and rented out if used by outside parties. In order to revamp the building for the *cabalgata*, a storage room would be transformed into a kitchen. This meant turning one wall into a wooden, swing-open window to sell food and drink over the counter. The renovation plan also called for painting and decorating the entire first floor of the building and bringing in kitchen equipment such as a cooktop, gas cylinder, sink, pots, pans, utensils, supplies, and so on. A large amount of labor would be required to accomplish the tasks required for the *cabalgata*.

The Development Association hired three local peons with carpentry skills to help construct the *galerón*. The *patróns* who make up the association sent peons to work on different
facets of the project. Closer to the date of the cabalgata, a few landowners worked together with their peons to finish the structure and other last-minute preparations for the big event. No police officers contributed to the construction of the community project.

The peons typically started construction on the building around 6:00 am and worked to roughly 4:00 pm daily. In the early morning before work began, Koke, Flaca’s main peon, would arrive and unlock her outside kitchen door and make coffee for anyone who wanted it. The laborers would then head off to get in a few good hours of work. Any patróns active in the project showed up around 8:00 am. From Flaca’s kitchen they drank coffee, oversaw the work, and discussed the progress and plans. They were joined by the workers around 9:00 am for a mid-morning coffee and a simple breakfast, usually a few crackers or cookies pulled off the shelf of the general store. After discussing the work with the peons present, everyone would go to the work site together for a few hours, the patróns overseeing and the peons laboring.

In the meantime, one or several female domestic workers would arrive to tend to chores in Flaca’s kitchen. The female workers were contracted and paid on a daily basis when needed to help with a multitude of tasks. For example, they prepared lunch for the workers and/or any tours that were scheduled to stop by in route on boat from Puerto Viejo to the popular tourist destination of Tortuguero, located several hours downstream. The domestic workers were all Nicaraguan; some came from San Juan del Norte while others were wives of local peons. Their work also included doing laundry, cleaning the rental cabins, restocking and organizing dry goods in the general store, cleaning out the refrigerator, or other tasks Flaca could not get to as she bounced back and forth from the construction, the school, tours, cabin guests, general store customers, phone calls, delivery trucks, and so on.
The domestic workers served a large lunch to the peons and patrons at midday. Groups took turns eating at the large wooden dining table in the back of the general store. A typical lunch always included white rice and black beans. On days such as these when many peons were present, a large pot of spaghetti in a habanero-tomato sauce or a small portion of chicken on the bone was also served to the peons. Shredded cabbage salad or pico de gallo were often on the table as well. After the workers ate, food was served to other community members such as the teacher(s), the local anthropologist, friendly police, or any other guests. The female domestic laborers sat and ate last. It was not uncommon for the workers to be served a different meal than what landowners and guests may eat. The domestic workers ate what was left over, but this was typically the higher quality serving that might consist of fish, freshwater shrimp, fresh cheese, or meat. The serving of lunch lasted several hours, as many people drank coffee afterwards and lingered standing in the kitchen after giving up their seats. The laborers were first to return to the worksite and later joined by their bosses around 2:00 pm, after the entire lunch process was complete. The domestic workers cleaned up the table and cooking area, covered leftover food, did the dishes, and tended to any outstanding duties such as collecting clothes from the line or emptying out dirty buckets before calling it a day around 4 pm. Many domestic workers received their pay in items from the general store or asked for basic goods on credit in addition to their pay. The average wage for the female domestic workers was 5.000 colones per day, or about US$9.00. During the weeks leading up to the cabalgata, there were both female and male peons working in Delta each day.

The labor required to build the galerón and prepare for the cabalgata consisted entirely of Nicaraguan migrants, save for the few times their patróns jumped in to assist. They worked for several weeks at the behest and under the supervision of the Development Association (and...
their respective patrons). They were assigned tasks according to their specific skills and their daily labor contributions were recorded in a notebook by Flaca. The work arrangement of providing coffee, snacks, and meals (and occasionally liquor at the end of the day) to the peons is an expected part of the labor arrangement. The Association provides the food and resources in lieu of their patróns during communal jobs such as this. The laborers know they can rely on the patróns for these favors and it is part of the responsibility of a “good” employer to provide this support. After lunch, as the peons linger in the kitchen, they will often request goods on credit from the general store or ask for favors or information for issues they need assistance in solving. Examples could be seeking goods such as batteries for a flashlight or information on when the next truck carrying animal feed will arrive. In other scenarios when conversations shift to a peon’s private life, their wife or the schooling of their children, the patróns are not hesitant to offer up harsh criticism or stern advice. It is in these daily interactions that the crux of economic power is evident. The patróns dictate where the peons go to work and what tasks they will do. The peons are dependent upon them for the supplies, tools, food, and other necessary resources. Wages are low and paid out at the end of projects such as the galerón construction project, minus their debts at the general store or any other outstanding credit debt. Little respect is shown by the patróns for the private affairs of the peons, and the general attitude of the landowners is that the peons are uneducated and unable to make decisions that are right for them and their families. The patróns’ power is derived from their control of the land, animals, and labor and this form of authority was present every day in Delta. The division and level of labor necessary to hold the cabalgata made even more visible the distinctions between patrón and peon.
Resources

Resources for the *cabalgata* (in the form of labor and supplies) seemed to appear from nowhere in the days leading up to the event. The acquisition of resources was especially impressive because it far exceeded the typical quantities of goods present in Delta. Based solely on the number of supplies, it was clear that this would not be an ordinary event. The social capital required to accomplish this task should not go without mention. Since the event was a fundraiser and there was no money in the Development Association’s budget for building expenses, the majority of the materials were repurposed or upcycled, save for some minor purchases such as electrical wiring, lightbulbs, PVC tubing, and nails. A group of peons constructed the massive wooden event hall/pavilion using the salvaged wood from the old bullring in Fatima. Other less-skilled peons cleared away the overgrown jungle and hollowed out a ditch around the parameter of the building to serve as a trench to catch rainwater. A makeshift bar was constructed in one corner of the pavilion using the same wood. Cement mix that was left over from a school construction project and originally donated by the MOPT (Ministry of Public Works and Transport) was used to create a foundation for the pavilion support posts. The mix would soon spoil so the remainder was used to create raised platform floors around the toilets in the wooden-stall bathrooms built specifically for the event. The bathrooms were closed off with shower curtains for privacy. From beneath porches or sheds, *patróns* contributed old items such as toilets, fencing, and sink basins. The zinc roofing that came from the same old bullring in Fatima was brought to Delta and salvaged. Peons scraped the metal sheets to remove the rust, patched any holes, and then painted the roofing so it would last longer. The color of the paint was a familiar blue.
By the time the *cabalgata* rolled around, I had been in the field for over eight months. I had established a good rapport with nearly everyone in the community, especially the parents of the school children and people who frequented the general store and center of the village. At this point, people were used to my presence and questions. Many people could tell when I did not understand things and would readily offer up explanations without me having to ask. As the community prepared for the *cabalgata*, I asked where the supplies were coming from and what they were for. I made notes and continued my work. After the *cabalgata*, I sat down with a key informant to make sure I got the details correct. I read off different resources, “the wood, the zinc, the paint?” There was a pause. Turning to a fellow *patrón* who was present, now with a sly grin, the informant asked, “*le digo*?” or “should I tell her?” Knowing I had missed out on something, I was all the more curious. I asked again where the paint came from. The landowner erupted in laughter and burst out “*la policia, mae*” (the police, man). Instantly, I made the connection with the blue coloring of the police outpost. I burst out in laughter too, then quickly returned to the logistics of the situation. “But how?” I asked. The response, interspersed with still heavy laughter, was “*Hice una torta* / I pulled a stunt.” I had to insist again, before I got a straight answer. With a shriek, one *patron* finally revealed, “*Por guarro, mae. Por guarro y cigarros*” (For liquor, man. For liquor and cigarettes). I couldn’t believe it! Somehow, this *patrón* had convinced a border patrol agent or agents to steal state resources in exchange for alcohol and cigarettes. This is the way Delta does and should function, according to the *patróns*.

These types of exchanges actually happened very frequently. However, this instance with the blue paint was slightly more brazen. I had observed police trade government resources for local goods many times. It was not uncommon to see border patrol agents trade surplus vegetables or gasoline for cheese produced on local farms or items from the general store, such
as cigarettes, snacks, or frozen fish. Exchanges of this sort occurred more frequently between the *patróns* and, in particular, one of the two rotating police squadrons. The other squadron would simply dump surplus vegetables into the river. One resident spoke of having retrieved a perfectly good head of cabbage out of the river. The social bonds and closeness between the police and *patróns* were dependent on this type of need-based reciprocal trade. It was a way of showing there was a relationship and, for many people, that developed trust. One example of this trust involved a border police officer coordinating a boat ride with a local landowner in the middle of the night to go and throw a fishing net in the river, an activity that is widely understood and recognized as illegal.

It was these types of relations that allowed the Development Association to produce the *cabalgata* in such a short time span. Regardless of whether they were loaned, donated, or purchased, the supplies were steadily flowing into Delta. The construction and improvements were coming together nicely in the days leading up to the event. Late one night, exactly two days before the opening dance of the *cabalgata*, I found Flaca, the Vice President of the Association, over in the new kitchen. She was speckled in white paint and smoking a cigarette. She had just finished applying the final coat of paint to the walls of the kitchen in the transformed abandoned building which would now serve as the *salon communal* of the Development Association.

**Field Notes 06/11/15**

*Flaca stood looking out of the new service window of the kitchen admiring the changes to the building. She said, “now this building belongs to the association.” She had offered it up to the doctors that morning who came to distribute milk to the new mothers. Por eso es, she said. Para atender a la gente, o cualquier cosa de la comunidad. (That’s what it’s for, she said. To attend to the people, or whatever need of the community.) Por eso es, she affirmed.*
To accomplish the renovation tasks and construction jobs in Delta, *patróns* draw upon many different ties to obtain resources. Bartering with the police for resources is just one example of how *patróns* exert this type of authority. It is characteristic of larger patterns of prestige and social status that are related to moving and accessing resources in the desolate borderlands.

The following day, on my way over to the school, I passed Flaca as she was unloading a huge shipment from a supermarket in Puerto Viejo. She had ordered hundreds of cases of beer and soft drinks. There were boxes full of food items: tortillas, vegetables, chips, candy, and paper supplies of every sort imaginable, napkins, plates, forks, and so on. She was neatly stacking all of the goods in the kitchen of the new Association building. Everyone’s hard work had paid off. By the end of the night, the only thing left to do was wait for the people to arrive the following day for the opening dance.

*Figure 32. The finished galerón in Delta, Costa Rica, constructed by joint community labor and made from reutilized materials as seen in 2015. This structure was later destroyed by Hurricane Otto in November of 2016.*
**Noche de Baile**

Along with the planning and organizing, the execution of the communal event is equally important to understanding social dynamics in Delta. While the *cabalgata* was not a typical or daily occurrence in the village, these types of communal events function to “provide a means to grasp the foundational or general organizational principles of society” (Kapferer 2010, 1). The actual horseback riding event was held on a Sunday, but the opening dance was scheduled for the Saturday night before. A disc jockey, an acquaintance of local patrons, arrived from San Carlos. He was hired by the Development Association to host the event. In his pickup truck, he brought a massive sound system and audiovisual display to hook up on the dirt dancefloor. By midday Saturday, bass-heavy ranchero music was thumping throughout the community from his DJ booth in the *galerón*. Food preparation was also underway. Several female migrant domestic workers were working in the kitchen. One of the women came from San Carlos, Costa Rica specifically to work the event. Another woman from San Juan del Norte, Nicaragua was also recruited to work. Other domestic workers belonged to Delta; however, they were all Nicaraguan women. They were busy shredding coconut for the fish soup and stocking up the kitchen in the community building with food for sale. One of the women went out in search of decorative palms and fresh flowers to create floral arrangements for the tables and walls of the seating area. The school teacher also volunteered his time in the kitchen since part of the proceeds were to go to the school. He worked mainly in stocking and organizing the kitchen. On the day of the event, he was in charge of the money in the kitchen from the food sales. This decision was deliberate as the *patróns* previously had commented during an Association meeting that money tends to disappear if workers handle it. They said it generally speaking, but they were insinuating that this applied to Nicaraguans.
By 7:00 pm that night, libations were flowing and people were beginning to congregate in the galerón. Some of the male peons had been drinking all day and were already intoxicated by nightfall. Based solely on the level of preparation, amount of food, and loud music, I was expecting a huge turnout. However, no real influx of people came for the dance. Instead, the attendees of the opening night dance were nearly all locals from Delta. Landowners, migrant farm hands, some women as domestic workers, and even the police attended. The female police chief who was at odds with the Development Association showed up with several of her male officers in tow. She wore a full face of make-up, a green mini-dress, and heels. The officers with her were also in street clothes. They were drinking and briefly partook in the activities before congregating near the public telephones, dancing a bit and then disappearing back over to the police post.

Two of my students from the local school were there with their parents. Their presence, however, was more of an exception than the norm. Missing from the social extravaganza were
the wives and children of the migrant worker population. Although the two students who were present belonged to a migratory family working as peons, their situation was unique in that this family is of Costa Rican nationality. In fact, they were the only peon family in the community of Costa Rican nationality. The Nicaraguan mothers, who are married to the migrant workers, all stayed at home with their children. In addition, the female domestic workers who were working the event were all single Nicaraguan women, either never married or divorced.

Several factors could explain the absence of married Nicaraguan migrant mothers. An obvious reason could be the real need to not leave the farm and property unattended (and thus vulnerable to theft). Other possible reasons include the real need to care for the children and/or the lack of money to purchase food and drink to partake in the fiesta. However, considering that it was not inappropriate for the Costa Rican children to be there and the lack of money did not stop the male peons from partaking in excessive drinking (many on credit), a difference in gender roles seems most probable.

Many scholars (Chant and Craske 2003; Gutmann 1996; Nencel 2001; Stevens 1965) have identified the distinct role that *machismo* plays in the symbolic construction and performance of gendered identities and sexualities, in particular that of masculinity in the Latin American context. Glittenberg (2008), in her work on the US-Mexico border, explained that *machismo* encompasses the "emic meaning of violent, drinking, bravado, jealous, physical, demanding, womanizing, [and] unfaithful" (35). This stereotypical gender ideal is, according to Chant and Craske (2003), in its most general form, "a cult of exaggerated masculinity" characterized by "the assertion of power and control over women" including in the form of sexual virility and prowess (14-15).
Machismo factors into the way public and private social spheres are conceptualized. These ideals influence understandings of who ought to be where, doing what sorts of activities, and the social stigmas associated with breaking these gender norms. For example, the familiar association of “el hombre en la calle, la mujer en la casa” (the man in the street, the woman in the house) captures the very essence of gendered role divisions. As Turner (1985) elaborated:

La calle [serves] as a metaphor for the world outside the home [and] is considered the proper testing ground for men’s masculinity but dangerously inappropriate for women. La casa expressed the ideal of the self-sacrificing wife dedicated to administering the home and the domestic economy, educating the children and...working for charity and the Church. (322)

It was not uncommon in Delta to hear landowners speak derogatorily of a mujer that only wants to “andar en la calle” (be or run around in the street). This phrase was used to refer to women who frequently left their home (for work or pleasure), thus ignoring or not prioritizing motherly or spousal duties, even if temporarily. The disgrace of being a woman ‘of the street’ involves a range of negative labels that imply anything from being disinterested, a bad mother/wife, or in other cases, a prostitute or whore. This divide reinforces the idea that women’s place is in the home, while the men assert their power amid the dangers of the ‘street.’ Remembering that the gender construct of machismo is not a trait inherently possessed by men, but rather a reified ideal that must constantly be earned, often through competition (Cubitt, 1995), the performative nature of gender becomes important to consider.

In Costa Rica, Chant and Craske (2003) identified the bullring central to annual fiestas as a quintessential ritual space for such performances in which men mount, bait, and dodge the massive animals in public displays of masculinity. Similarly, still speaking about Costa Rica, she continued by identifying “the cantina (male-only bar or saloon), where men drink and socialize
with other men away from ‘domesticating influences’ of women and children” as part of this constant and expected reaffirmation of manliness (p. 16).

The galerón and the communal kitchen and bar that night served as an ad-hoc community cantina, where men actively displayed their bravado. As drinking and celebration continued through the night, performed masculinity, in combination with a clear absence of women, led to an event that proved to be socially (and later economically) damaging for one man. This encounter illustrates not only gender norms in Delta, but also class lines that peons cannot cross in regard to women.

Koke is an adult male in his early 40s. I always thought he was much older because his dark skin is weathered and wrinkled. He is of Nicaraguan nationality, originally from the city of Tuestepe in the Boaco department of Nicaragua. Koke migrated to Costa Rica in the 1990s with his brother and brother-in-law when he was nineteen years old. They came to work in the coffee fields picking coffee beans during the four-month harvest season in the border town of Upala, over a hundred miles away from Delta. When the harvest was over, he found work on a chicken farm and stayed in Upala for nearly a decade. It was there that he met his wife, whose Nicaraguan parents live in a village downstream known as Delta Colorado, on the Costa Rican side of the border. He and his wife came to Delta seven years ago with their three children in tow. He and his family now live on a farm owned by his brother-in-law. Overtime, Koke saved up enough money raising and breeding hogs to buy a boat and an outboard engine. To provide for his family, he works as a peon for Flaca. He earns the majority of his money this way. Although he is paid on a daily basis, it is a rather stable working arrangement since Flaca is a single, older, female business owner often in need of laborers. He, therefore, provides much of the manual labor that she cannot perform. He burns her trash, does repairs to her cabins,
performs light carpentry work, cleans and prepares fish, kills chickens for cooking, collects eggs, cleans roofs, does landscaping, among other tasks. When I asked him what he does for work, he responded “lo que salga” or, basically, whatever is available. He also uses his boat to generate money whenever possible. Koke provides rides or fishing tours to visitors who come to Delta and need transportation on the river. This has earned him the nickname Koke-Taxi.

On the day of the opening dance, he was busy doing some final carpentry work for Flaca in the cabin next to mine. Around noon, he ate lunch (prepared by one of the Nicaraguan domestic workers) alongside the other peons in Flaca’s busy kitchen. Koke and some of the other workers were already drinking. Beer is a rare commodity in Delta and since many of the workers had provided labor for the construction of the galerón in the weeks leading up to the event, they were drinking on credit from the money they were due from the Development Association.

The DJ had music blaring, so it was a lively afternoon leading up to the dance. As the evening commenced, the men (landowners, migrant workers, and police alike) moved between the galerón and the only television set in Delta broadcasting soccer games. Koke, like many of the men, was belligerently drunk by nightfall. He kept offering me a beer even though I repeatedly declined. One of the women said he does that so when he is broke, people will give him drinks, as if to pay them forward. Another one of the male peons was heavily intoxicated in the doorway to the kitchen where the women were preparing food. He was hanging out with hopes of winning over the Nicaraguan woman who came from San Carlos to work. The women jokingly told him to go take a shower to sober up or he would have no luck with her. It was all in good fun and everyone was enjoying themselves, making light of the situation.

Koke kept pressing a woman to dance with him, but it was not going over well with her significant other, a patrón of the landowning class. I watched as he repeatedly and
unsuccessfully made advances. He complained out loud that there were no women to dance with and that the *galerón* was full men. After hitting on the woman one last time, her significant other assertively asked Koke where was his wife. And why he didn’t bring his wife if he wanted so badly to dance? He then aggressively proclaimed, “*mi mujer no es para el pueblo*” or “my woman isn’t for everyone’s pleasure.” Koke relinquished, but this heated exchanged sowed the seed for what would later follow.

Over in the *galerón*, people were congregated around the bar which was staffed by two male *patróns* who serve on the association. No one was out on the dance floor yet, but before long, I noticed Koke out there alone. He was sloppily dancing about, his sombrero falling off his head. He got down on his knees and began to thrust the dirt floor. No one seemed to pay much mind and, having broken the ice, others followed out onto the dance floor. Seeing fellow dancers take to the festivities, Koke restarted his attempt to find a dance partner. Again, he returned to the woman. At this point, the man she was with exploded. Like many drunken bar arguments, they were at each other’s throats, shouting profanities, calling names, and making threats. As the exchange escalated, I ran to get Flaca because other individuals were having no luck with breaking up the exchange. Friends of the *patrón* came to his side and urged him to calm down. One *patrón* told the man to ignore Koke, to pay him no mind, as he was a worthless drunk. Ultimately, it was Flaca, his boss, who put an end to the dispute. None of the police stepped in to intervene. Flaca got directly in Koke’s face, pointed her index finger in his eyes, and shouted “*Te voy a pichasear, hijo de puta, YA!*” an extremely vulgar way of saying she would beat the crap out of him and finishing off with a profanity to pack an extra verbal punch. Her words were effective enough to separate the two men and Flaca was able to move Koke over to the *salon comunal* with the help of some muscular men.
As the festivities carried on, people danced and ate the delicious food offerings such as rice, chicken, fried fish, tortilla chips, refried beans, snacks, soft drinks, and beer. Of the roughly thirty people in attendance, most had migrated to the kitchen window in the salon comunal by the end of the night. The men were lined up at the window drinking and talking. One of the male police officers had returned and was chatting with a patron in the corner. Flaca began shutting down the party around 10:30 pm. The level of intoxication had reached a climax and the women had to get up at 4:00 am to begin food preparation for the horseback riding event the next morning. As the bar and kitchen shut down and the music came to a halt, people began to file out into the night. A neighbor of Koke’s convinced him to get in his boat and he supposedly took him home. I drove two of the female domestic workers the 4 kilometers home to their houses. The others stayed in one of Flaca’s cabinas. The rest of the men had disappeared into the darkness by the time I returned. As Flaca shut off lights, she remembered that they did not have a lock or chain for the reach-in freezer that contained all of the beers. One of the young members of the Development Association offered to sleep on top of the freezer so no one would return later in the night and steal the beer. This was a wise decision, considering that the beer sales were clearly the main income generator for the cabalgata.

Koke’s drunk performance in front of nearly the entire village turned out to have grave social and economic consequences. His belligerent behavior broke too many social norms and nearly cost him his job. Not only was he the source of ridicule and gossip among local residents, but he also returned home that night having drunk away his weeks-worth of earnings. Photos and video of his debauchery survived the night and circulated on cellphones via text messages and WhatsApp. Several days later, Flaca told me that someone sent the footage to him. Some people commented that he deserved the embarrassment since he caused so much trouble, trying to start
fights and being such an annoying drunk. The Association was upset with him too because he wound up owing them money for his bar tab, even though he had worked for weeks on the *galerón*. Flaca was angry because he stopped coming to work. She told me his wife was going to be livid because work was so hard to come by and he drank two weeks’ worth of pay. After the night of the dance, he returned home empty-handed, drunk, broke, ashamed, and, worse yet, indebted to the Association. Flaca shook her head in disapproval, thinking out loud about his children.

Before the fallout, Koke was present every day in the center of the village, working as Flaca’s *peon*. Even on days when he was not working, he was in her kitchen at some point throughout the day. After he deviated from the locally understood social and gender norms (aggressively drunk toward a *patrón* and flamboyantly dancing), Koke disappeared for an extended period of time. He did not show his face in the center of the village or at work for four whole months. At first, I did not notice that he had not been around, but Flaca noticed right away due to the absence of her primary laborer. She had called him several times to tell him to come to work and to pay his debt to the Association, but messages and calls went unanswered. She joked that his wife was not letting him leave, which could partly explain his absence. More importantly, though, was the social and economic toll left behind that night. It was three months before anyone even saw him, and it was from a distance down the river.

**Field Notes 09/04/2015**

*Koke hasn’t been around since the drunken debauchery of the cabalgata, almost 3 months ago. When we headed down the river he was standing in front of Lilliam’s house and he waved as we passed by. It was a sad wave and Flaca scoffed, “Esta cercandose el hijo de puta. / The son of a bitch is coming closer. He’ll be back soon.”*
Flaca knew he would be back someday to reclaim his job, but in the meantime, she hired a new laborer, named Payo, who had recently arrived from San Juan del Norte, Nicaragua. The younger male migrant lived with another Nicaraguan family, also from San Juan del Norte on the edge of the village. He worked as a day laborer helping Flaca for several months before ultimately leaving to find work in another Costa Rican village up the river. It was not until December (a full six months after Koke vanished) that he seized the opportunity to recover his previous working arrangements, upon learning of Payo’s departure. He knew Flaca needed a laborer and he sought redemption with a bit of finesse and overt, obsequious gestures one night in a public social performance in Flaca’s kitchen.

Field Notes 12/05/2015

I noticed Koke was kissing up to Flaca more so than usual. He cleaned the fish, quickly tended to pots on the stove, went to the rancho in the rain to check on a noise, and he even took the knife right out of Flaca’s hand when she was cutting cilantro to do the chopping for her. He also spoke with her about the tours she receives from time to time during which Adriana (a Nicaraguan domestic worker) comes to help her with food preparation. He questioned what profit remained for Flaca by the time she pays for the food, cooking gas, and pays Adriana? He told her not to pay Adriana and to hire him instead. Flaca let him go on and she appeared to be listening. He was really pandering to her needs. He continued on, even randomly offering to help me rearrange the furniture in my cabin, a completely unsolicited offer. He asked permission before taking shots of cacique that he cautiously sipped. Later, even though he had not been working for the Flaca, he donated ₡10 mil colones ($20 US) toward another upcoming community event she was organizing. Then the truth came out. The topic of Payo came up and he blurted out that he was jealous of Payo. He said he was jealous that Flaca was going to give him a cabina to live in, which would make him a permanent worker. When I asked him jokingly if he really was jealous, he flirtingly responded “Claro que si estaba celoso, yo soy el cabro de la Flaca.” (Of course I was jealous, I am Flaca’s man.)

Koke reestablished himself as Flaca’s main laborer that night. He did so without directly coming out and apologizing. Instead, he rattled off all the ways in which he could be useful and obedient to her. Flaca, knowing that he was committing to a rigorous work contract, let him list every task he could imagine. Eventually, without a verbal acknowledgment, she accepted his
plea. Her tolerance of him and permitting him to drink at her kitchen table (for free!) was her way of signaling that he was welcome to come back. She tested his sincerity and dedication by pushing for his financial support for the upcoming community event, even though she knew he was tight on money. He emptied his wallet to please her. His exaggeratedly subservient actions signified his remorse and willingness to comply with Flaca’s requests. He spent that evening in the kitchen openly declaring his loyalty and peonage to Flaca, his boss. It was a public dance of knowing his role as her laborer. His final remark, “Yo soy el cabro de la Flaca” or “I am Flaca’s man,” shows that even though he was married, he recognized a sense of duty, protection, and responsibility for Flaca and her well-being.

Even though she was strictly his employer, his statement is a clear illustration of the dependency at the heart of hacendado paternalism, as explained by Wolf and Mintz (1957) and Edelman (1992). It is an example of the role fictive kinship, or compadrazgo ties, plays in local patrón-peon relations in Delta. It is evident that Koke is not Flaca’s man or husband, but in his public act of defining his role as her peon, he inflated his labor relation to a type of spousal responsibility. McEwen’s (1975) work in the Bolivian community of Reyes further discussed the class dichotomy between patróns-peons that was at play with Koke and Flaca. He identified the patróns (or gente buena) at the high end of the social strata in terms of prestige, while peons or campesinos occupy the complete opposite position as the lowest members in society. As evident in Koke’s attempt to be in Flaca’s good graces, “the relations between strata are still those of deference on the one sided and privilege on the other” (114). Koke’s actions are a clear demonstration of his understanding and acceptance of the inferior and dependent labor role of a peon. He purposefully exhibited this subservient behavior to underscore his determination to be a ‘good’ peon to earn back his role.
The Main Event

The morning of the *cabalgata* did not begin well. It had rained heavily throughout the night, and by the time I made my way to the kitchen for coffee, Flaca was sweeping rain water out the door with a gloom look on her face. I was expecting to see tons of people for the big event. Surprised, I asked “*y la cabalgata*?” In a defeated tone, she responded “Nadie vino, no ves?” / “No one showed up, can’t you see?” In stark contrast to the previous day, there was no music playing and only a few people from the Association were in the *galerón*, waiting and hoping the rain did not scare everyone away.

It was not until noon that people began to show up. Cars and pickup trucks with attached horse trailers pulled in at the public dock and began to unload people and animals. The majority of participants headed over to and congregated around the bar. Luis, the schoolteacher, was running the registration booth at a table in the *galerón*. It cost ₡10,000 *colones*, or US $20 to enroll in the *cabalgata*. The entrance fee included participation in the horseback riding event, a numbered placard to pin on one’s shirt, an appetizer plate of food upon arrival, lunch at the ride’s midway point, chances to win prizes, and entertainment. I sat with Luis as the participants filed in to enroll. I knew very few of them because most of the people came from outside of the border region. Some came from Guapiles, while others came from Puerto Viejo de Sarapiquí. The majority, however, hailed from San Carlos, Alajuela. The total number of paid participants was sixty-three—a good turnout considering the rainy weather and the long distance people had to travel to get there.

With so many attendees, there were not enough horses to go around. So the Association decided to provide a boat excursion down the river to the midway point of the trail ride, where lunch would be served to the riders. After the group headed out on horseback, three boats were
prepared and sent downstream. The first boat carried the DJ and hauled the massive sound system complete with a computer, speakers, and subwoofers. Some of the paid attendees also went in this party boat. The second was a long flat boat with seats covered by a roof. This boat was packed full of registered participants and cruised alongside the music boat. The third boat carried the event hosts (the local Association workers), supplies, and food for the midway lunch.

Several miles down the river, a clearing had been prepared by peons on one of the patrón’s properties alongside the river. The boats all pulled in, tied up to trees, and then unloaded to await the riders. Once they arrived, a rustic jungle fiesta complete with cold beers, loud music, and hot food ensued. A traditional wood-burning stove had been taken to the destination and a fire was lit to reheat the food. Traditional food items such as boiled bananas, rice, beans, fried fish, and tortillas filled with mashed malanga (taro root) were served. Sliced limes, coolers of beer, and refreshments were also on hand. The Development Association even packed and draped a massive black tarp from the trees so that people could stay dry. Individuals danced in the sloshy mud, drank, ate, socialized, and galloped around on the horses.

Figure 34. A Nicaraguan domestic worker and members of the Development Association await the arrival of event participants at the midway point of the horseback riding trail.
After the afternoon lunch and festivities, the horseback riders returned to the trail and headed north toward Delta. Everyone else loaded back into the boats and returned to Delta with the supplies and food. The socializing, music, and cash bar continued into the evening. Once all of the riders returned, the president of the Development Association awarded the different prizes using the DJ’s microphone. The grand prize was a colt and other prizes included horse and cattle equipment, such as lassos and a horse jump.

The resources to carry out the *cabalgata*, whether in the form of labor, supplies, food, or prizes, came primarily from outside of Delta. Even the individuals who attended the event came from other towns, beyond the border community. Outside businesses and individuals sponsored the event. For example, *El Colono*, a nationwide agricultural supply store, and *Copicentro*, a
digital printing/office supply store, both located in Puerto Viejo, contributed money and prizes. Other businesses in Puerto Viejo such as grocery and liquor stores sent supplies for the kitchen and bar. Items that went unused were returned to the businesses free of charge.

The horseback riding event and the coordination of resources that it required clearly showed the far-reaching social and economic ties of the *patrón* community members. As mentioned in Chapter 5, this example illustrates the importance and impact of one’s ability to “*traer cosas de afuera*” or to bring things (resources) into the desolate border region. It is a critical part of the role and responsibility of the *patróns* of Delta. Further, transforming a remote clearing in the middle of the jungle into a makeshift restaurant and dance party is no easy feat. The details of how the party was planned also speaks to the ability to harness outside resources. The event was undoubtedly created for and catered to individuals who reside long distances outside of Delta. It is significant that not only paid participation but also attendance at the event were overwhelmingly comprised of outsiders. Aside from the Development Association members who ran the event and the local female domestic workers who cooked and served the food, only two families from Delta participated in the event. One of them paid the enrollment fee and the other was a couple who came and purchased beer and food á la carte. The event was planned, knowing all along that the money to be generated from the event, like the resources, also had to come from people outside of the community.
When the community leaders were planning the *cabalgata*, there were discussions about what type of food to sell/serve and what trail route would provide the best experience for non-locals. Initially, they wanted to designate a trail across the river on Isla Calero, to attract curiosity seekers with the lure of the conflict. They knew they could market the event by tying it to Isla Calero, a place that had captured the imagination of the country, primarily through news media and politics. However, the logistics of crossing the animals and supplies required that the *cabalgata* be held on a trail on the mainland originating in Delta. Nonetheless, it was still advertised as “frente a Isla Calero” to attract outsiders. The food items, especially the taro root, boiled bananas, and dried jerky that were given out during the sign-in, were purposefully chosen because they represented a nostalgia for basic food items associated with *el campo*, or the countryside. These foods were so uncommon that I only saw them served during the *cabalgata*, as opposed to being part of an everyday diet. The transport and use of the traditional wood-burning stove at the halfway point was also deliberately thought out to provide city-dwellers with
an authentic, country feel. The *patróns* of the Development Association knew exactly what they were planning and how to advertise it, according to the preferences of their social networks in the heartland of the country.

When all was said and done, the Association did not earn a significant profit. They only broke even because the money earned from the event registration, kitchen, and bar sales just covered the Association’s building and labor costs for the *galerón*. However, the *cabalgata* produced another form of capital in prestige and social status. This very public display of resources, entertainment, and jobs presented as a benevolent contribution and commitment to the community is perhaps the ultimate portrayal or expression of a ‘good’ *patrón*. An event of this magnitude could only have been organized and executed utilizing the ties of the *patróns* in their roles on the Development Association. The status that these irregular, yet extraordinarily significant, events afford the *patróns* is unparalleled and central to defining the ways in which *patróns*, their migrant workers, and the border police interact.
PART IV. CONCLUSION

The documentation and investigation of border regions and the ways in which these spaces are politicized and experienced on a daily basis inform anthropological understandings of the state, conflict, security, migration, and community. The approach of this work, encompassing macro-level political narratives and local social realities, permitted a more nuanced depiction of a border village in an epoch of conflict and change and how this flux shapes the lives of residents in the frontier zone of Costa Rica and Nicaragua. In particular, the ethnographic examples recorded in Delta, Costa Rica and presented in this work outlined the relational dynamics of three social entities brought together in the midst of the conflict, namely the Costa Rican patróns, Nicaraguan migrant workers, and the Costa Rican National Police. Uniquely situated within the unfolding of this politically tumultuous event, the illustrations of community projects, NGO initiatives, cross-border cooperation, power struggles, and labor relations shed led on how the border village is organized and functions against the backdrop of varied political narratives.

The inclusion of firsthand narratives provided by political and military leaders offered a rare glimpse into how decision makers craft and appropriate events and histories of peripheral regions and national imaginaries to advance political agendas and create legitimacy. Addressing how larger processes such as politicization and nationalistic narratives factor into community relations and border realities provided important context and attached a historical trajectory to the 2010-2015 border happenings. The interviews presented in this work also exemplified how these histories and political accounts can be used to reactivate national memories of a centuries-old conflict that elicits very real xenophobic sentiments and complicates binational relations.

It is within this paradox that I located the problem of my dissertation work, carried out in the Costa Rica-Nicaragua border region, and the relevance of the findings. The legacy of
xenophobia against Nicaraguan migrants in Costa Rica is well documented and especially prevalent in times and events of national importance, such as the Isla Calero border dispute examined here (Sandoval 2004). The goal of my work, then, was to employ Costa Rican border realities to draw attention to the regional nuances and disconnects between national rhetoric, security, and immigration as they often stand in stark contrast to people’s border experiences. As depicted in the previous chapters of this work, the consequences of this discord in Costa Rica (fueled in the heartland by nationalistic sentiment from the border conflict) resulted in failed policies, misallocation of manpower and security forces, wasted resources, and missed opportunities for social inclusion and infrastructural development. Furthermore, the example of the Isla Calero border conflict underscored the real problems of driving policies based on ‘threats’ to national security and national identity.

As an alternative, this research argued that border realities, such as social relations and community needs, should inform border policy and security. The import of this study rested in its ability to speak localized empirical truths to macro-level narratives of conflict and fear. It is in this relationship of ethnographic realities vis-à-vis border imaginaries that we can begin to envision a human rights-based approach to borders, utilizing examples recorded in Delta, Costa Rica as a potential starting point. In this regard, there are lessons to be learned in the social dynamics unique to the Costa Rica-Nicaragua border region, particularly as they play out in a time of conflict and change. The most interesting finding of this research rested in the analysis of the social relations observed in Delta, Costa Rica amid the changing demographics and increase in police and security personnel. Although, on a national level, Costa Rican and Nicaraguan responses to the dispute escalated and at times incorporated xenophobic, nativist rhetoric, the social reality in Delta did not reflect this sentiment. As the second half of this dissertation
displayed, the different social groupings present in the community (namely, the Costa Rican
patróns, Nicaraguan migrant workers, and the National Police) create a sense of belonging based
on their shared time spent in the physical border zone. The ethnographic examples presented
here, of border police and undocumented migrants casually co-existing and attending communal
social events, starkly contrasts the idea of draconian border policies and illegal human beings. It
raises new interpretations of the meaning of community, including who belongs and based on
what qualifications. On the same note, the border village of Delta, Costa Rica is not a migrant
utopia. Exploitative labor practices, poverty, marginalization, and social discord exist between
the groups. The research presented in this work aimed to not lose focus of this nuance when
looking at social relations within the community of Delta and how these meanings of belonging
are constantly shifting, oftentimes in relation to political narratives or events such as conflict.

In further regard to community, it is important to reiterate the definition of community
utilized in this research. Following Arensberg’s extensive work on this topic, I employed
community as a “structured social field of individual relationships unfolding through time”
(1961). This understanding involves two distinct concepts that I found useful. The first is
envisioning community as sample or setting for discovering interconnections in the process and
organization of social phenomena. The second is a temporal dynamic that captures the repetitive
and enduring nature of community as sample. Conducting research in Delta, Costa Rica was in
many ways ideal, but particularly in relation to defining a community within which to understand
social relations as this field site was small and rather easy to define. This setting allowed for the
study of a wide range of social and cultural phenomena within or against the background of a
‘whole’ community. However, great effort was allocated in this study to not lose sight of how
larger society and politics affect the community. For this reason, Part I of this dissertation was
dedicated to describing the national context and politics that played an integral role in shaping social realities and relations on the ground in Delta.

The developments outlined in Chapter 2 were an example of the larger state initiatives that played out in the local context of Delta. In this section, I mapped out the myriad changes that have taken place as a direct result of the border conflict. It had been decades since the Costa Rican government had expressed interest in the border region, and the invasion of Costa Rica by Edén Pastora and the Sandinista army in October of 2010 completely changed the development trajectory of Delta and, to a lesser extent, other border communities in the northeastern region. During Laura Chinchilla’s presidency, Pastora’s actions also harkened in a political era marked with a sense of urgency and alarm that fueled Costa Rica’s rapid rollout of massive, multimillion-dollar infrastructure and security plans. In a span of five years, the community of Delta witnessed the introduction of electricity, internet, a land route to the interior of the country, a new primary school, public/school bus routes, ambulance service, a helicopter pad, and perhaps, most importantly, a massive (over tenfold) increase in police officers that drastically changed the social dynamics of village life.

As demonstrated in Chapter 2, the border development plan that drastically transformed life in Delta was centered on providing supplies and resources to the police in support of national security efforts during a “state of emergency.” The urgency of the plan is captured in Carlos Acosta Monge’s (former director of the National Highway Council or Consejo Nacional de Vialidad) reference to the work as a proyecto de guerra, or a war project. Due to these declarations, the multifaceted border development initiative not only bypassed routine environmental studies, but it also lacked a thought-out design with any focus on social sustainability and basic logistical considerations.
However, the pretext of an urgent, looming threat to expedite the border plan was not substantiated. In the final ruling by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in December of 2015, in response to Nicaragua’s counter-claim of environmental degradation on behalf of Costa Rica, the court found that:

in circumstances of this case, Costa Rica has not shown the existence of an emergency that justified constructing the road without undertaking an environmental impact assessment. In fact, completion of the project was going to take, and is indeed taking, several years. In addition, when Costa Rica embarked upon the construction of the road, the situation in the disputed territory was before the Court, which shortly thereafter issued provisional measures. (Paragraph 158 of the ICJ ruling, cited in Boeglin 2018)

*Ruta 1856 Juan Rafael Mora Porras*, also known as *la trocha* or the border road, is by far the largest, most notorious aspect of all the Costa Rican border initiatives. It may also be the most glaring example of waste and miscalculation by the Chinchilla administration. An estimated $2 million US dollars of fiscal resources were lost and squandered in the national corruption scandal and failed execution of this part of the border development plan (Rojas 2017). As a result, and as discussed in Chapter 2, the road was never completed. It lacks bridges to connect road portions along the border and multiple bridges that were built have since collapsed. In Delta, the road has proven to be a source of contention as local residents cannot provide the maintenance to keep the road traversable. As presented in Chapter 2, community leaders were constantly petitioning assistance with the road to fill massive holes that eventually halted the bus service. A letter asking for help was even drafted and given to President Solís when he visited the region years later.

The *trocha* was problematic, especially from a political point of view. However, it did bring some benefits to Delta, as it connected the village to the rest of the country via a land route for the first time in history. However, due to cost, distance, unfamiliarity, and maintenance
issues, this road does not directly or immediately remedy the isolation of rural border families to urban centers, goods, and services.

When in good condition, one impactful change is the implementation of a public bus service and the ability of emergency ambulance service. Clearly, these transportation options are very positive additions to the community. As previously stated, the bus route to and from the nearest high school is also a newfound benefit to village life. However, the presence of these bus options at the time of the study were still impractical for many residents. The long and expensive ride to the city was avoided at all costs, and individuals, especially migrant families, were unfamiliar with the city. They would only make the trip for a dire need and they would not do so alone. Similarly, the school bus service to the high school represents new opportunities for young people in Delta. However, parents and even students were generally apathetic about where this path would lead. This was especially the case for young boys who, before reaching their teenage years, have already acquired the skills necessary to manage small tracts of land and animals. Both boys whom I observed come of high school age were already earning money in farm work as peons and they did not want to miss out on immediate earnings in order to continue their studies. They both had purchased their own cell phones and sent for pre-pad minutes whenever anyone would do them the purchasing favor. Since farming and animals are the only readily available (and most lucrative) source of work in the border region, continued studies are not relevant to many families, students and parents alike.

In evaluating the overall public good of the many developments and advancements that arrived at Delta, perhaps the most successful was the non-discriminatory ambulance service provided by the Red Cross in emergency situations. As the example in Chapter 2 illustrates, the service is being utilized in an interesting fashion that epitomizes transborder medical
coordination and cooperation. The example of the extraction of the young Nicaraguan girl represents a unique scenario in which the Costa Rican border police will permit the passage of Nicaraguan personnel into Costa Rica, even though it is not an official port of entry. This is significant because it depicts how state authorities use their discretion in applying the law. It represents a respect for human life, regardless of nationality or migration status. The transborder medical coordination is an example of prioritizing human life and a humanitarian approach in border security. It emphasizes how borders do not have to be death traps and spaces that are void of medical services.

Data presented in Chapter 2 also identified problematic dynamics of the border development plan that, unlike the smoothly operating medical services, raise questions about the state’s claimed interest in the people of the border region. Interviews and an analysis of the implementation of border development projects revealed that the people of Delta were an afterthought to state priorities for an increased Costa Rican security apparatus. We heard from former President Laura Chinchilla as she described learning of the people and their dire situation in the border. While mention should be made of her efforts to increase access to education for children in the border region, one must also ask how a school can be built with no reliable source of potable water? Furthermore, the excessive provisions allocated to the police demonstrated an awareness of the water problem and a distinct effort to only provide the resource to the priority in the region, the police. The contradictions were alarming and underscored how development never would have arrived to Delta without the impetus of the international border dispute.

It is blatant oversight like this that deserves critique as it violates basic human rights (i.e., access to clean water) of a vulnerable population, such as migrant children. While a holding tank was installed at the rear of the school in an attempt to deal with the water situation, in times of
draught there was still no water. As the example in Chapter 2 illustrated, this type of uneven
development led to dangerous situations in which children were fetching and using dirty,
contaminated water from the well to prepare food. In addition to this, and as mentioned in
Chapter 5, the exaggerated supply of bottled water and other extravagant resources to the police
further perpetuated a social divide in the community that ultimately undermined larger security
initiatives evident in local interpretations of authority.

As the case of the border development initiative plan, prioritizing national security
interests under the guise of an emergency in lieu of an approach centered on community needs,
local knowledge, and the environment created a situation mired with political repercussions,
ecological damage, and economic waste. Had the Costa Rican government included the border
residents’ input in the route design or choice of materials, some of the construction debacles may
have been avoided. Similarly, had the Costa Rican government paid credence to questions of
social sustainability in regard to road maintenance and upkeep, they could have capitalized on
the great sense of pride community members possessed in relation to safe use of the roadway.
Not taking into account local knowledge, such as which areas tend to flood during the rainy
season and what natural resources are available to build bridges or prevent erosion, shed light on
a missed opportunity for communal ownership and incorporation of a marginalized population
into the national fold. This was perhaps most visible with the border road, but it pertained to
other development initiatives in Delta as well—for example, the lack of potable water to the
village population and absence of electricity to half of the community. Regrettably, the people of
Delta were an afterthought to the ‘war project’ machine that evaded environmental regulations
and logic. While some positive changes can be attributed to this plan, such as cell phone service,
internet signal, and ambulance access, it was obvious that these were secondary benefits due to
the police need of infrastructure and not actually meant to address community needs.

The actions carried out by the Chinchilla administration in Delta, however, cannot fairly
be assessed without a broader examination of the international politics of the dispute.
Particularly, attention must be paid to the narrative put forth by Edén Pastora, as Chinchilla was
forced to engage directly with him through her actions in Delta. As we saw in Chapter 3,
multiple political narratives were put forth by those in power to claim political legitimacy. The
events described by Pastora are crucial for understanding the border region in general and the
dynamics of the conflict under investigation in this study. Pastora’s narrative was interesting
because of his intimate knowledge and relationship with the region. He was familiar with the
zone because he fought and led troops in the San Juan River basin in the 1980s. After the civil
war ended, he spent time living throughout the border region and still today owns a house in San
Juan del Norte, Nicaragua. His account provided a unique history of the place and perspective of
the dispute.

As Pastora described in Chapter 3, San Juan del Norte, Nicaragua was destroyed during
the Contra War and struggled to recuperate from the violence in the years that followed. As the
town slowly began to repopulate, albeit still isolated from the Nicaraguan state, there was a
proliferation in transborder ties between the Nicaraguans (many who were return migrants) and
Costa Ricans due to access to Costa Rican markets, good, and services. Prior to 2010, schooling,
communications, healthcare, currency, goods (such as liquor, cigarettes, gasoline), and even
language were imported from Costa Rica. According to Pastora, once the conflict commenced
and political tensions and security operations by both states began to escalate, there was an effort
on behalf of the Chinchilla administration to stifle transborder trade. This primarily was out of
fear that Costa Rican goods would be used to aid the Nicaraguan “enemy.” Accounts of residents in the border region presented in Chapter 3 and observations of actions in the region (for example, transborder cooperation for emergency medical attention presented in Chapter 2) illustrated that Chinchilla’s call to diminish transborder ties fell on deaf ears. This was yet another example of state rhetoric being out of touch with border realities since, as presented Chapter 3, border residents clearly did not view their “neighbors” and “brothers” from the other side of the border as “enemies.” The shared border identity for many, including Costa Ricans, superseded calls to pledge patriotic allegiances to a nationality.

Evidence pointed to the existence of a transborder identity rooted in the shared experience of life in the frontier zone. Since border residents of both nationalities were so isolated from the state, their loyalties remained primarily to one another, as these communal ties were tried and true in times of need. Belonging to this border identity superseded nationalistic divides, even in a time of conflict when bolstered by political rhetoric and powerful leaders encouraging patriotic action on behalf of the nation. Belonging in the Rio San Juan border region was defined by the shared experience of enduring hardships and carving a life out of the harsh, remote, and dangerous environment. The clandestine sale of gasoline to people from both sides of the border, regardless of their political loyalty, was another example of need-based relations that function regardless of nationality or other differences. Where the state failed economically, locals stepped in to fill the void, regardless of cross-border restrictions.

In his narrative, Pastora went on to explain that the state not only failed economically and socially but also in providing security in the region. He claimed that the region existed outside the boundaries of both states in this regard. As a result, the abandoned territory was then claimed by non-state actors, namely narco-traffickers. According to Pastora, it was the influx of drug
money that contributed to the economic recovery of San Juan and the subsequent proliferation of 
a narcocultura in the town. This detail is important because, according to Pastora, it was the 
presence of a drug kingpin in the disputed territory that necessitated and justified his invasion of 
Costa Rica. The dreadful picture of life in San Juan that he portrayed rendered him the defender 
of law and order, and thus a heroic protagonist.

The reality is that Pastora did play a central role in the conflict, but it was not quite as he 
painted it. He was very much a provocateur and instigator, intentionally propelling nationalistic 
fervor that he knew would stoke political support for the Sandinistas (and Daniel Ortega) in the 
2011 national election. His story was political fodder reinforced by his status, power, and 
platform. The narrative allowed him to capitalize on nationalistic sentiment by claiming that the 
border (the Rio San Juan) was under attack. It is a clear example of how politicians aim to 
captivate the public imagination through the invention of a threat at the border; a familiar 
political stratagem to create legitimacy through propaganda and deliver a political victory.

The political payoff from the drummed-up conflict by Pastora and other members of the 
Sandinista party can be seen in Ortega’s 2011 presidential victory, in which he captured 64% of 
the national vote.¹ After the elections, political tensions between Costa Rica and Nicaragua 
began to cool and took on a different tone. This can be attributed to several factors. In Nicaragua, 
with the passing of the elections, there was less of a need to rally support through nationalistic 
propaganda. Similarly, as the border dispute case made its way through the ICJ, the dynamics of 
the dispute took on a more legal focus. In Costa Rica, when President Luis Guillermo Solis took

¹ It is important to note that the Organization of American States and other observers such as the European Union 
identified “significant irregularities” in the elections. Furthermore, Ortega’s candidacy was controversial as he 
petitioned the Sandinista-controlled Supreme Court in 2009 to ban restrictions on consecutive terms. He later 
changed the constitution again in 2014, eliminating the limit on the number of terms the president can serve. 
office in 2014, he inherited a much different set of conflict-related obstacles than those characterizing the Chinchilla administration.

At the same time, it is important to note the different backgrounds of Chinchilla and Solís and their respective approaches to governing that also played a role in how the conflict unfolded on an international level. The discussion of President Solís’ narrative presented in the latter half of Chapter 3 showcased his academic background and his emphasis on the historical dynamic of nation state formation in Central America in regard to creating and demarcating borders. In particular, his narrative reflected how this is very much an unfinished project, both between Costa Rica and Nicaragua and more generally in the region.

Solís admitted to parts of the border not being precisely defined and this represented a great concern that could lead to larger problems. Specifically, his justification for prioritizing efforts related to Isla Calero infrastructure is that a Nicaraguan legal victory could call into question other parts of the northern Costa Rican border. He dismissed Pastora’s righteous claims to combat drug trafficking and clean up the region, even while he admitted the ‘sociology of the [drug] problem’ in the Atlantic border zone. However, Solís, like all politicians, was not immune to also setting forth a particular agenda at the border and crafting a narrative on behalf of Costa Rica’s interests. His depiction of the border dispute, based heavily in the history of the region, prioritized Costa Rican sovereignty, land rights, and protection of maritime boundaries.

As we saw in Chapter 3, both leaders referenced the disputed history of the region. Both leaders were actively engaged with remaking and reconstructing the significance of the border. While Solís spoke at length to the historical import, Pastora also referenced the treaty of Cañas-Jerez. He suggested that Chinchilla should have sat down with the Sandinistas and “[taken] out the agreements and the Cañas-Jerez treaty to discuss it between us, as brothers.” Most pointedly
in Pastora’s narrative, but also in Solis’ version of the conflict, the early agreements and rulings took on new meaning as proof that there was a contentious national history between the two countries. It is not a history of binational agreements and understandings but one representing discord and competition, even if at other moments in time the boundaries seemed widely accepted and uncontroversial.

The historical rulings then became marked points of contention, dots on a historical timeline, each representing conflict as opposed to peace. The very repetitive nature of the treaties themselves was employed to construct a pattern of disagreement and conflict that characterized Costa Rica and Nicaraguan relations in regard to their shared boundary. They became reifying proof that a conflict did exist, one deeply rooted in national histories and imaginaries that can be (re)activated to garner political legitimacy.

In the Nicaragua narrative, the treaties were evidence that Costa Rica has historically been preoccupied with “stealing” Nicaraguan rights to land. In the Costa Rican narrative of national history, they were referenced to illustrate how insecure, unestablished, and thus vulnerable other parts of the border are. It is this clever rewriting of national histories, by both parties, that imbued the treaties with meaning of conflict and turmoil. The treaties were transformed (and put to work in a political fashion) from agreements representing harmony and progress to points of contention that were then used to further build narratives of opposition in this political climate.

Having outlined the macro-level, national initiatives, and narratives that were relevant to the shaping of the conflict in the local context, Part II of this work was aimed at countering some of these claims with ethnographic realities. At this junction, the unit of analysis shifted to examine details and phenomena of daily life in the form of social relations and community
organization to accomplish collective goals. For this reason, Chapter 4 was concerned with providing an orientation to the location and setting of the field site Delta, Costa Rica.

As discussed in Chapter 4, the border village of Delta, Costa Rica is located in the far northeastern corner of the country. The small village is situated at the river delta of the Rio San Juan which forms the aquatic border with Nicaragua. This particular site is the gateway for all Costa Rican and cross-border travel to the disputed territory of Isla Calero and to the larger border region. It is home to between 41-50 families who live on large farms and pastures carved out of the lush jungle. The exact number is determined by the movement of migrant families into or out of the region. Inward migration is primarily in search of labor opportunities in farming or cattle raising. Outward flows of various duration are typically to seek medical attention (i.e., during childbirth or in the case of severe injuries/illnesses), to attend to longer-term family obligations/celebrations, or to undertake official errands that require the use of government offices or national banks.

The region is geographically isolated from the Costa Rican heartland. Families residing on the farms are of Costa Rican and/or Nicaraguan nationalities. The community is also home to the largest border police base in the region, a schoolhouse, a general store, and a communal building for holding meetings and events. Most residents of Delta live in sub-standard conditions without potable water, access to electricity, or regular/reliable medical attention. The economy is based on subsistence farming, cattle herding, and small-scale production of dairy products such as cheese, sour cream, and milk. The individuals that comprise the community of Delta, Costa Rica can be broken down into distinct social groups (patróns, peons) and organizations (the national police).
Chapter 5 began with a discussion of the distinguishing characteristics of these different social groupings. The groups that comprise the village of Delta are the patróns and peons. The men and women of the border police are an active state organization and social entity present in Delta that factors greatly into the social fabric of the community. The patróns are the landowning class who are predominantly of Costa Rican nationality. Many of them are from the San Carlos region of Costa Rica and maintain residences in both locations. The Rio San Juan which directly connects Delta to San Carlos facilitated the movement of most patróns decades ago, after the Contra War ended. Their land possessions and animals provide them with a privileged status in the community as they are the sole providers of employment. Their ability to call upon vast networks and “traer cosa de afuera” or bring resources in from urban centers also ascribes them a privileged status. They run the local general store, own lodges, have large boats for transporting animals, and facilitate the movement of goods, information, and resources into and out of the border region.

The peons are peasant farm laborers who are almost all of Nicaraguan nationality. Peons are migrant workers who generally lack legal status in Costa Rica. They speak a distinct dialect of Nicaraguan Spanish and they hail from many different regions of Nicaragua. No trend could be distinguished for a particular sending region in Nicaragua. The peons possess a minimal level of formal education (some primary school) and many are illiterate. Their living conditions and material resources are of lesser quality and kind than the patróns as they work for minimal wages performing grueling labor tasks such as chopping fields, caring for animals, maintaining fences, and fumigating.

The border police, or policia de fronteras, are a dominant social organization in the social fabric of Delta. The police presence was established there in 2011, shortly after the start of the
border dispute when their base was moved from Barra del Colorado to the current location in Delta. The police personnel form part of a large security apparatus that operates in Delta and includes land and water patrol units, floating docks, trucks, vans, ATVs, a tractor, surveillance cameras, weapons, and a helicopter pad. The border patrol maintains two groups of between fifteen and twenty men and women at the Delta base. The border patrol agents are new officers, comprised mainly of young men who rotate out of the region in eight-day shifts. Since the border patrol was created by President Laura Chinchilla in response to the border conflict, the men and women who work in Delta are not from there. They come from different parts of Costa Rica and are not familiar with the remote jungle environment. They do not know the river or local customs and they are viewed very much as outsiders.

What became interesting and was explored in the latter half of Chapter 5 were the social relations between these different groups and how they interacted on a daily basis. Patrón-peon relations can be characterized by many distinctions, but it is first and foremost a labor relationship formed on the basis of exploitative practices. In Delta, two types of labor arrangements exist between patrons and peons. In both, the peons are the providers of labor. The difference lies mainly in the duration of employment and the types of tasks they perform. Most peons are contracted as day laborers and are paid roughly $11 US dollars per day. The jobs they perform are short and extremely strenuous; examples include digging ditches, construction work, hauling materials, large fumigation jobs, or assisting in clearing trees to create a new pasture.

Other peons occupy the coveted position of farm administrator, which is a more stable and reliable work arrangement. The peons perform many different routine tasks in their role as farm administrators ranging from animal supervision and care, tending to or clearing the fields, and watching over the property and possessions of their patróns. These men are paid on a
monthly basis and make between $300-$500 each month. In addition to wages and a possible December *aguinaldo* (or Christmas bonus), the *patrón* also provide basic provisions to the peon and his family. The *patrón* is responsible for supplying housing to their peons and *diarios*, which are packages of food essentials such as rice, beans, coffee, sugar, and cooking oil. They also often provide transportation such as a dugout canoe to maneuver in the zone or technologies such a solar panel to charge small electronics or cell phones in order to communicate with their workers. At the end of the year, a good *patrón* will pay a loyal peon the December *aguinaldo* and provide food (meat), used clothing, and toys or goodies for the children of the migrant family during the holiday season.

The unequal labor relations between *patrón*-peons, in which the *patrón* has all of the resources and disburses them in a purportedly generous fashion to a dependent laborer, allows for the perpetuation of *hacendado* paternalism (Wolf & Mintz 1957). In many cases, los *patróns* are viewed as the benevolent and “symbolic ‘father’” to the peons who “function as his symbolic ‘children,’” which only further reinforces the power and labor dichotomy between these two groups (392). In this sense, the gestures and gifts that are bestowed upon the peons create continued and greater indebtedness, further enforcing the demarcation between social groups. The example provided in Chapter 5, in which a *patrón* gifted a December hog and permitted a soccer game instead of work, was one clear example of this dynamic. *Hacendado* paternalism was visible not only in the distribution of resources, *diarios*, and Christmas parties of toys and clothes for peon families, but also it was evident in the way landowners serve as a link on a daily basis to information, goods, and services situated in the heartland of Costa Rica. This form of dependency to have access to resources and capital provided the *patróns* with further authority and it had profound effects in shaping social interactions in Delta.
The privileged status of the *patróns* or landowning class not only affects relations with the peons or migrant workers, but it also greatly shaped interactions with the local police. As discussed in the section on preparing for the *cabalgata*, the *patróns* were in a power struggle over local authority with the border police who were viewed as outsiders who did not belong to the community. Neither the landowners nor the migrants expressed a clear understanding of what the role of the police is in the community. However, the Costa Rican landowners believed they should do more to contribute to the community and they were not shy in voicing their opinion. The police presence in Delta infringed on the traditional or commonly understood notion of how life and labor function in the village; covertly or under the radar. The difference in relations between police Squadron A and Squadron B, discussed in Chapter 5, showed how participation in illicit economies led to good social relations. The police chief and officers, who engaged in questionable bartering acts such as using state goods and resources to trade or relying on locals for favors and creature comforts, maintained good relations with the landowners. On the other hand, while the chief and officers of the other squadron still interacted with the landowners through purchasing goods and conveying important information, they did not engage in illicit acts and thus their relations were much more strained and antagonistic. The example, in Chapter 6, of the Macha and Flaca disagreeing over proper (legal) steps to building a structure in Delta illustrated this power struggle.

The relations between the border police and migrant population are less arduous. The migrant population interacted less frequently than the *patróns* with the police in both formal and informal capacities. Significantly, the migrant population did not seek out the police for official assistance or information. The *patróns* occupied the authoritative role of making decisions,
providing information, and mediating disputes, as evident in the example of domestic violence instance mentioned in Chapter 5.

Most notably, police-migrant relations in Delta were amicable and characterized on behalf of the police by (non)action, passivity, and neutrality leaning toward empathy. Based on examples of police actions and interview responses, I argue that a humanitarian emphasis permeates Costa Rican border policing in Delta and this approach is mandated in a top-down fashion via discourses and directives such as the National Violence Prevention Plan presented by the Ministry of Justice during the Oscar Arias Sanchez administration. In addition, it cannot be overlooked that policing migration was not a top priority during the 2010-2015 border conflict. Policing in the border region during this period was focused on Sandinista surveillance and drug trafficking. Similarly, the fact that some officers stated a preference for being stationed at Delta due to more relaxed job duties or the ability to slack off suggested that they could get away with the bare minimum of enforcement, an attitude that might also influence relations with the migrant population. This underscored the extent to which immigration law enforcement was not a priority in Delta and this facet of police-migrant relations should not be overlooked. Had this been an established priority passed down in the chain of commands, one could expect the outcome to look very different.

The majority of police-migrant relations in Delta took place in non-official or informal capacities. In Chapter 5, examples of these interactions were provided in the form of police socializing, eating, drinking, and watching sports in Delta with Nicaraguan migrants. Nightly gatherings where police shared food and drink, even joked and sang with migrants at the same dinner table, highlighted the good nature of these relations. Also relevant to the amicable police-migrant relations were the non-actions of police. Multiple examples of times police did not
engage or interfere were presented in Chapter 5. The lack of police intervention or interest in the migrant information session, a publicized community event in which over fifty migrant families participated, was the most notable example. In addition, there were other gatherings in which the majority of the migrant population participated that did not attract police attention or action. These occasions included multiple, large-scale events in which the Red Cross distributed aid and resources to the community, primarily to migrant household heads.

The vignette in which the border patrol did in fact detain and deport a group of migrants shed light on how community membership and belonging were defined in the eyes of the police. A distinction can be made between migrants who lived and worked in Delta and those who were newcomers without an established connection or labor role in the community. Belonging is thus defined by one’s rootedness or time spent in the border region, a status that establishes a sense of familiarity among individuals belonging to the different social groups. For example, the fact that border police know individuals in the migrant population on a personal basis, usually through their labor association to a *patrón*, permitted the police to correlate their presence (albeit “illegal”) to a meaningful labor role in the community. The distinctions expressed by two border police, in which they identified “illegal” migrants based on their newly-arrived status as defined by carrying a suitcase, not only illuminated the inconsistent application of immigration policies by the police, but underscored larger understandings and constructions of a border identity that trumps notions of nationality, (il)legality, and linguistic and/or racial identity. This border identity that included undocumented migrants mainly because they had been in Delta for a prolonged period of time and occupied a clear labor role provided the basis for a new and unique construction of belonging that has profound implications when applied cross-culturally. For example, if other communities in the United States or elsewhere could come to see migrants with
established roots or labor ties as productive members of a community, based simply on their presence and/or contribution, xenophobia and stereotypical depictions of migrants could be reduced. In this sense, the humanitarian approach found in Delta can serve as a model to rethink how we define and redefine our own communities and who belongs in them. In perhaps a more humanistic sense, this finding addressed the important value of personal ties and social relations, even as it applies to the police.

The detailed depiction of the organization, planning, and execution of the *cabalgata* event in Chapter 6 exemplified the reality of how social relations functioned in Delta, both on a daily basis and within the context of a communal task. The efforts of the Development Association and local school board to carry out such a massive event required collaboration and cooperation in labor, resources, and authority. Due to the remote location, restrictive laws surrounding new construction, and lack of available funding, the Development Association had to be creative in locating resources. Their plan to reallocate the old wood from the bullring in Fatima to circumvent park regulations showed not only an understanding of how things operated in the border, but also how drawing upon ties to municipal leaders in provincial centers can override authority of the newly arrived police squadrons. This was the case in the actual building of the *salon communal*, but also in putting rank-and-file officers in their place when they helped themselves to resources that belonged to the Association. The quarrel between the police chief and Flaca revealed that prior to the arrival of such a large police force, there was an unspoken agreement about how things operated in Delta. This was mostly defined by not seeking permission or authorization, whether that be in the informal movement of goods (even across the border as mentioned in Pastora’s narrative), when tilling trees or constructing new homes, roads, or buildings. Business in the border outpost was managed by the *patróns* and their peons.
provided the labor to bring the plans to fruition, ultimately generating profit. With the arrival of newly minted, young police officers who were not from Delta, local authority and power lines were constantly challenged and redefined, especially in regard to village life. There clearly were illegal happenings (such as the presence of illegal migrants or illegal fishing) that border patrol ignored or in which they even participated. Then there were other illegal areas such as tilling of trees that were punishable acts resulting in charges, fines, and a stay in jail. Gray areas, such as building permits using repurposed material, was a topic in flux, being contested but apparently with loopholes or caveats such as it ‘benefitted the community.’

The artful sharing of resources and goods between patróns and police further depicted how social relations are created in response to personal and communal needs. The exchange of gasoline, hoses/tools, cigarettes, cheese, liquor, vegetables, or information highlighted the complex and often complicated relations between patróns and police. The blue paint that was provided to the Association for the cabalgata was perhaps the most obvious representation of these relations and also of the patróns’ status defined by their ability to acquire resources. Furthermore, the difference in behavior between the two police squadrons showed the variance in relations that resulted from a willingness of police to participate in illicit or questionable relations in the border. What resources could be acquired in this fashion in the village were brought in through their vast network of patróns’ social and business contacts. Through these connections, they were able to transform the remote border post into a massive celebration with food and drink (for over sixty participants and their families), complete with a floating DJ, cash bar, kitchen, two renovated structures, bathrooms, prizes, and dancing. This required communication with outside sponsors and close collaboration with vendors to ensure the timely and accurate delivery of goods.
It also required labor, which was organized through the *patróns’* individual peons as well as recruited help from domestic laborers from the San Carlos region of Costa Rica and Nicaragua. The male peons worked for weeks to prepare the structures and surrounding land for the *cabalgata*. The women came nearer to the date of the *cabalgata* to prepare/serve food, clean the dining area, set up tables, and cut and decorate the space with fresh flowers and palm leaves. In order to meet the fast-approaching deadline for the event and to perform skilled tasks such as electrical wiring, some *patróns* worked alongside the peons. The schoolteacher, who typically left town during the weekends, stayed to volunteer in the kitchen and the police pitched in with the paint and showed up to partake in the festivities the night of the dance. The efforts realized on behalf of the community, albeit orchestrated by the *patróns*, were impressive and directly related to status in the village.

On the night of the opening dance, festivities were in full swing and no outsiders (except for the DJ) were present. The dance was very much an event attended by the community. One group not present was the Nicaraguan migrant wives/mothers. This gender divergence could be attributed to the divide between *la casa*/*la calle* or to more practical concerns such as vigilance on the farms and childcare. Nonetheless, the lack of women led to an escalation between two men (a *patrón* and a peon), resulting in an altercation that was ultimately settled by the offending peon’s boss. As discussed in Chapter 5, this example of the *patrón* disciplining and threatening her peon showed the unequal power dynamics of *hacendado* paternalism, as discussed at length in other works (Edelman 1999; McEwen 1975; Wold and Mintz 1957). The dismissive and degrading comments made by the *patrón* with whom he was fighting and other men who tried to break up the fight, referring to Koke as a worthless drunk and other vulgarities, further defined the peon’s status in the social hierarchy of Delta. For example, and in contrast, drunk male
patróns (obnoxious or not) were not disrespected. In addition, the repercussions to Koke’s night of drinking were profound. After the cabalgata ended, he not only had no money to show for his weeks of hard work, but he was indebted to the Association. He did not return, due to his verguenza or shame attributed to his actions and lack of ability to pay. He lost his job with Flaca and had to reassert his submissive labor status in a public showing of willingness to abide by Flaca’s wishes to regain her good faith as his patrón.

Relations outside of the community were equally as important, especially for the patróns. The main horseback riding event, as discussed in Chapter 6, emphasized the role outsiders played in raising funds for the school and Development Association. It was clear from the beginning that in order to generate money, the event would need to draw on resources and networks that did not exist within the community. Participants came from cities and towns located in the heartland of Costa Rica for two main reasons. The event was pitched as an authentic, traditional, and idyllic experience of el campo—from the special menu of comidas típicas to the use of a traditional wood-burning stove, the jungle setting for the lunch, boat ride, music, and theme. Participants also came partly because of the lure of the frontier and the border conflict that had captured the imagination of the country. Many people, simply stated, were curious to see what it was really like: a peaceful (but not perfect) border community where divides of nationality, race, and language are less defined and where other demarcations of power, authority, and status are being redrawn.

For Further Research

This research is tied to the broad body of anthropological literature addressing borders and boundaries in metaphorical and symbolic ways. However, from the start, one aim of this study was to contribute to the collection of ethnographic evidence depicting social realities of
state security and migration in geopolitical border regions. In addressing possible points of future research, I recommend continued efforts on this front as very few anthropological studies confront the actual clash of state authority and notions of belonging in police-migrant relations within border zones. These encounters are important and may often stray from theoretical discussions that exist about encounters with the state.

Furthermore, one limitation of this research was the lack of a multi-sited research strategy. An interesting comparison could be drawn by comparing transborder activities and social relations at official ports of entry such as Paso Canoas on Costa Rica’s southern border or Peñas Blancas, a highly trafficked crossing on the Nicaraguan border in the Pacific. Especially considering the more recent 2018 political violence under President Daniel Ortega that is spurring new waves of Nicaraguan migration to Costa Rica, a multi-sited or comparative approach to these dynamics could prove to be very informative.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

A Timeline of the Isla Calero Dispute:
Events from October 2010 through March 2011
As published in The Tico Times, March 9, 2011

Oct. 18, 2010: Nicaragua begins dredging the border of the Río San Juan with the goal of facilitating better navigation on the river.

Oct. 21: Costa Rica denounces that Nicaragua allegedly moved sediment from the dredging operation onto Isla Calero, causing environmental damage.


Oct. 23: Nicaragua’s President Daniel Ortega sends troops to the border to “combat drug trafficking.”

Oct. 24: Costa Rica opens an investigation into environmental damages allegedly caused by the dredging of the river. Costa Rican police withdraw from the disputed area and Nicaraguan soldiers place a flag on the site.

Oct. 27: Nicaragua reports violations of “armed Costa Rican forces in Nicaragua territory.”

Nov. 1: Costa Rica shows photographs of Nicaraguan soldiers on the Isla Calero and asks the Organization of American States (OAS) to convene on the issue. Nicaragua announces it will ask the International Court of Justice to define the limits of the disputed zone.

Nov. 3: First session of the OAS begins to analyze the conflict.

Nov. 5: OAS Secretary General José Miguel Insulza begins trips to San José and Managua.

Nov. 6: Costa Rica’s President Laura Chinchilla announces that Costa Rica will go to the Security Council of the United Nations if the mediation of the OAS fails.

Nov. 7: Insulza flies over the disputed part of the border.

Nov. 12: The OAS approves a resolution that asks Nicaragua to withdraw its troops, which the Ortega government rejects.

Nov. 16: Costa Rica condemns Nicaragua before the Ramsar Convention, which is an international organization dedicated to the protection of wetlands.
Nov. 17: The Costa Rican Prosecutor’s Office releases an order for the capture of Nicaraguan Edén Pastora, who is in charge of the Rio San Juan dredging, due to the alleged environmental damage.

Nov. 18: Costa Rica files a suit against Nicaragua before the world court for environmental damage and violating Costa Rica’s sovereignty.

Nov. 26: Nicaragua cancels a planned summit with Costa Rica.

Nov. 27: Nicaragua broadcasts a “White Paper” alleging the “the hidden truth about Costa Rica” in the border dispute.

Nov. 30: A mission from the Ramsar Committee visits the zone to verify environmental damage.


Dec. 3: Nicaragua informs the U.N. Security Council about the litigation with Costa Rica.


Jan. 7, 2011: Nicaragua rejects the Ramsar committee’s announcement that it’s detected environmental damage, saying that the assessment came only from Costa Rican information.

Jan. 10: Nicaragua’s army claims that Costa Rica is preparing a possible “attack” to “stir up” the border dispute.

Jan. 24: Costa Rica’s Foreign Minister René Castro affirms in Madrid that his country encountered an “armed invasion” by Nicaragua. Nicaragua’s Vice President Jaime Morales Carazo calls Castro’s comments a part of his tour of “meanness” across Europe.

Jan. 31: After Nicaragua removes its troops from the disputed zone, Costa Rica tells the world court that it’s part of an apparent trick.

Feb. 1: The Nicaraguan Institute of Territorial Studies publishes a new map that includes parts of the Isla Calero as Nicaragua territory.


March 8: The world court orders Nicaragua and Costa Rica not to station military forces or police in the disputed zone. Costa Rica expresses “profound satisfaction” with the decision and Nicaragua emphasizes that the world court did not refer to the incident as an “invasion” and that the country has “the right to dredge” the Río San Juan.
APPENDIX B

Maps

Map of Nicaragua-Costa Rica border region marking disputed territory

Credit: Dr. Andreas Mende, amende@racsa.co.cr
Satellite Map of San Juan River Mouth and Disputed Territory as published by the Costa Rican Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Worship