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Landscapes of Freedom and Inequality
Environmental Histories of the Pacific and
Caribbean Coasts of Colombia

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Landscapes of Freedom and Inequality

Environmental Histories of the Pacific and Caribbean Coasts of Colombia

Claudia Leal and Shawn Van Ausdal¹

Abstract

In this comparative environmental history, we examine the divergent trajectories of Colombia's coastal forests since the mid-19th century. In the Pacific lowlands, natural resource extraction by a black peasantry altered the forested landscape but did not transform it completely. Left by the white, merchant elite in charge of the extractive process, this post-emancipation society maintained their territorial independence and avoided significant internal differentiation. Racial divisions, however, signaled the continuation of disparities that had their origin in slavery and colonialism. In the Caribbean, by contrast, the expansion of cattle ranching better integrated the region into the nation, but at the expense of extensive deforestation and the marginalization of what had been its relatively independent peasantry. By paying attention to the ecological and social basis of landscape appropriation and change, we suggest that environmental history can help us better understand the production of inequality in Latin America.

Keywords: deforestation | cattle ranching | post-emancipation societies

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1. Introduction

On January 18, 2013, a headline from *El Tiempo*, Colombia's most important newspaper, read: "Dry forest, the ecosystem that saved Colombia from a hotel" (Silva Herrera 2013).² The controversy in question, which remains very much alive, is whether or not the owners of private property inside the popular Tayrona National Park, on the Caribbean coast, have the right to build a hotel on their land. One of the strongest arguments against the hotel is that the park protects one of Colombia's few relicts of dry tropical forest, an ecosystem that during part of the year "does honor to its name and appears as a desert, a sterile area in which only shrubs and deadwood appear to grow", but which comes alive with the rains, "transforming into a display of multicolored plants – yellow *guayacanes*, pink *ocobos*, red *cámbulos* – that keep growing until they form a jungle just as biodiverse and dense as the Amazon" (Silva Herrera 2013). According to biologist Daniel Janzen (1988: 130), dry tropical forests are "the most threatened of the major tropical forest types" in Latin America. In Colombia, they once covered 80,000 km², largely on the Caribbean coast; today just 1.5 percent of these forests remain (Díaz Merlano 2006: 134). Cattle ranching has been the driving force behind their disappearance. Clearing the forest to plant African grasses, a process that started in the mid-19th century, has dramatically changed the look of the Caribbean lowlands. While there are banana and oil palm plantations, as well as mechanized farms and scattered peasant plots, it is pasture that dominates.

Moving west to the Pacific coast, we find a very different picture. At the close of the 20th century, it was estimated that 77 percent of the region was covered by forests, 55 percent of which were in excellent condition (Proyecto Biopacífico 1998: 35). Flying over this region on a rare clear day, one can see an endless carpet of trees broken mostly by meandering rivers. These forests are very different from those that once covered the Caribbean. Colombia's Pacific coast is one of the rainiest regions in the world. Towards the southern end of the coast, rainfall decreases to 2,000 mm per year, but in certain areas it exceeds 10,000 mm (West 1957). By comparison, annual rainfall in Manaus (at the center of the Amazon basin) is 2,000 mm and in Berlin it is 570 mm. The unusual amount of water that falls on the Pacific coast of Colombia has led scientists to classify its forests as *pluvial*, an extreme version of the renowned tropical rain forests. High precipitation and the associated lack of a clear dry season, coupled with an altitudinal gradient on the western flank of the Andes, which border the coast, provide an extraordinary set of natural conditions that have favored the development of an astounding diversity of life forms (Gentry 1982).

² This and all other translations are ours.

Map 1: Colombian Forest Cover



Source: Based on data and maps from Juan Manuel Díaz Merlano (2006) and the Instituto de Hidrología, Meteorología y Estudios Ambientales (IDEAM) (2009). Cartography by Paola Luna, Cartography Lab, Universidad de Los Andes.

While the dry and pluvial forests of Colombia's coasts have had opposite fates, the contemporary landscapes of these regions tend to be regarded in similar ways. The grasslands of the Caribbean coast, including the famous Sabanas de Bolívar, are often thought to be natural when they are largely human made. Likewise, the persistence of forests in the Pacific has perpetuated the idea that it is a region devoid of history and change. In the 18th century, however, slaves working the placer mines of the Pacific lowlands produced most of the gold exported by the viceroyalty of New Granada. Moreover, the descendants of those slaves appropriated this forested territory by using its varied resources to procure food and shelter as well as minerals and other natural resources for export. In both cases, by naturalizing what are really cultural landscapes, we risk misreading their social and economic history. In this working paper, we examine processes of settlement, economic configuration, and landscape transformation in these two regions to account, in part, for their differing trajectories, but also to underscore how an environmental sensibility can enrich social history and shed light on questions of inequality. To help us in this task, we turn to a relatively new field, environmental history, which pays close attention to the social aspects of environmental change.

1.1. Social Aspects of Environmental Change

Environmental history emerged in the 1970s in the United States, the country where it remains strongest. Since then, as John McNeill (2010a: 364) – a leading figure in the field – suggests, it has “become one of the fastest-growing – quite possible the fastest of all – subfields within professional history writing”. In recent decades, environmental history has also established roots in Europe, Latin America, Australia, South Asia, and China (Sutter 2003; Castro and Funes 2008; McNeill 2010a). The origins of this global endeavor can be traced back to the growth of the environmental movement, which changed the way a budding group of historians conceptualized nature and incorporated it into their work. Driven by concern over widespread degradation, they began writing narratives that foregrounded the historical transformation of different environments: clearing forests, overfishing the oceans, draining wetlands, and damming rivers. Despite an emphasis on the dialectical character of human-environment relations, much of the early work in the field tended to focus on tales of despoliation, whether driven by human greed, colonial relations, or capitalist imperative (Worster 1982).

The first works on Latin American environmental history follow this tendency, as shown by the two best-known books from this period, Warren Dean's (1995) *With Broad Ax*

and *Firebrand* and Elinor Melville's (1994) *A Plague of Sheep*.³ While remarkable in many ways, these studies also highlight the limits of early environmental history. Focusing on the progressive destruction of Brazil's Atlantic Forest, Dean's elegant and rich narrative ends up sounding like a musical variation in which this single motif is repeated in slightly changed form over time. Likewise, Melville's assumptions about the inherent environmental stewardship of indigenous societies and the destructive propensities of ungulate populations pushed her to construct a tale of environmental collapse based on suspect evidence (Butzer and Butzer 1993; Sluyter 2002).

Confronted with such limitations, environmental history (including the Latin American branch) underwent an important process of introspection, which has helped the field mature and expand (Coates 2004; McNeill 2010a; Sutter 2013). A conceptual shift at the core of this transformation has been to question and move beyond declensionist narratives, which trace the movement from unspoiled to spoiled. Although degradation is often undeniable, it is important to recognize that environmental change is not unidirectional. For example, Susanna Hecht (2010) has called attention to the recent resurgence of forest cover in various Latin American countries as the productive basis of the countryside shifts. More significantly, declensionist narratives frequently rely on the idea of wilderness – which categorically separates humans from nature – as their point of departure; and they derive moral lessons and normative clarity from the loss of supposedly pristine worlds or the harmonious relationship that certain groups are said to have had with their environment. In response, critics countered that nature is rarely, if ever, an untouched realm separate from human experience; and many began to rely on the idea of hybridity as a more fruitful way to conceptualize the environment (Cronon 1995; White 1996). Environmental historians have also inverted the normative character of nature: instead of treating it as a moral yardstick, they investigate how people invest meaning in nature, and how, in turn, such ideas shape both social and natural worlds (Cronon 1992).

Unburdened by the imperative of denouncing degradation, a number of historians have shifted the focus of their research from how societies modify environments to how the materiality of nature helps shape the unfolding of history. In *Mosquito Empires*, for example, McNeill (2010b) aptly demonstrates how the etiology of yellow fever fundamentally shaped the geopolitics of the colonial Caribbean: the ecological and social transformations that enabled the spread of its pesky vector, and generated

3 Note that both of these works were written by scholars from the United States and Australia and initially published in the US. Latin American scholars also began writing environmental histories at this time (Cariño 1996; Tortolero 1996; Drummond 1997). Works published in Latin America, however, usually have a more restricted national audience. Dean and Melville's books have both been translated (the first into Portuguese and the second into Spanish by Fondo de Cultura Económica) and widely distributed.

resistance to the disease in local populations, also impeded subsequent territorial conquests by European powers by decimating their armies. Mosquitoes and yellow fever thus became indispensable protagonists in Caribbean imperial history. Environmentally-based histories of disease have also highlighted the ways in which inequality, ecology, and ideas of nature are intertwined. Gregg Mitman (2007), for instance, shows how the late-nineteenth century allergy sufferers among the US elite helped to create vacation resorts in places conceived of as natural, simultaneously reducing their distress and confirming their privileged social status. These kinds of transformations have expanded the scope of the field and have demonstrated that environmental history can contribute to a wide range of social and historical concerns, such as questions of empire and social inequality.

The tendency to stress the social side of environmental history, and thus further dialogue with other historical fields, can also be seen in studies of the environmental-management state. As Paul Sutter (2013) explains, conservation policy, environmental regulation, agriculture, science, engineering, public health, and warfare have all proven fruitful topics of analysis. A recent book that examines the much-studied Mexican Revolution in a new light shows this potential. In *Revolutionary Parks*, Emily Wakild (2011) demonstrates how the history of nature conservation in Mexico during the 1930s departs from the standard account, which identifies Yellowstone National Park as the singular birthplace. Far from seeking to set aside pristine environments, this early and broad experiment in natural park creation (40 in six years) concentrated on Central Mexico, the most populated and deteriorated area of the country. Wakild combines environmental and social history to explain how this conservation policy was conceived, alongside agrarian reform, to promote social justice in the countryside.

From the seminal work by Alfred Crosby (1972), *The Columbian Exchange*, to John Soluri's (2005) *Banana Cultures*, environmental history has also advanced our understanding of global connections, illustrating yet another facet of the field's rapprochement with social concerns. While Crosby laid the foundation, with his exploration of the enormous changes wrought by the transfer of organisms from the Old World to the New after 1492, Soluri adds a level complexity by linking banana consumption in the US with tropical deforestation in Honduras. Until the 1960s, banana producers marketed only one variety: the *Gros Michel*, valued for its hardiness and appearance, but susceptible to Panama Disease. Since traders and consumers balked at attempts to introduce disease-resistant varieties, which did not adequately satisfy their perception of an ideal banana, plantation owners repeatedly abandoned affected areas to continue planting the *Gros Michel* in newly cleared stretches of forest. Eating

habits and trading networks thus help explain landscape transformation in a story that moves well beyond a strict focus on the loss of virgin forests.

1.2. The Case of the Caribbean and Pacific Coasts of Colombia

The question of deforestation brings us back to the fate of the dry and pluvial forests of the Caribbean and Pacific coasts of Colombia. Forest loss has been a prominent theme in Latin American environmental history, as shown in the above-mentioned books by Dean (1995) and Soluri (2005), as well as Reinaldo Funes' (2004) work, which explains how the sugar industry transformed Cuba's landscape from forest to cane field to pasture. Following in their footsteps, our study offers new insights by approaching forest history in novel ways. Unlike most studies, we contrast two cases: one in which the forest was decimated and another in which the landscape was altered but not denuded. In this manner, we show that deforestation is not the only story that environmental historians can tell about tropical forests; transformation has not always meant destruction. Additionally, our case studies underscore the potential of environmental history to bring new perspectives to the study of inequality – a fundamental topic in Latin America's past and present. We show that the history of landscape change is deeply intertwined with the production of inequalities, for unequal access to natural resources lies at the core of both social differentiation and landscape history. Understanding such entanglements requires an examination of both the material and social aspects of natural resource use.

In Colombia's Caribbean lowlands, ranchers embarked upon a process of territorial expansion that extended and consolidated the highly unequal land tenure structure that characterizes the region. Surprisingly, however, many studies of ranching, in Colombia and throughout tropical Latin America, ignore the material basis of this expansion: the forests tend to disappear as if by magic and pasture grasses spontaneously sprout. While the introduction of new African grasses facilitated the "pasturization" of the landscape, it nonetheless required a good deal of work: large tropical trees had to be felled, brush cleared and firebreaks built, pastures planted and weeded, fences erected, etc. The cost and effort of such endeavors, and the widespread use of wage labor, suggest that economic concerns were as much behind this transformation as more frequent explanations that emphasize the political or cultural logic of ranching. Paying attention to the material and ecological basis of landscape change thus brings its social character into sharper focus as well as sheds light on the production of inequality. In the mid-19th century, the peasantry of the Caribbean coast was relatively independent, with access to land and natural resources that provided for their subsistence and marketable products. With the expansion of ranching, however, they progressively lost

access to farmland and forest products, undermining their former independence. The conversion of forest to grass, more than simply the diffusion of cattle or biases in the legal system, was key to this process of land appropriation. Thus, at the same time that ranching further integrated the Caribbean lowlands into the national economy, deforestation marginalized its peasantry.

In the Pacific lowlands, free black people had access to a varied environment that included spaces to hunt and fish, small parcels of land to cultivate plantains, maize and a few other staples, and timber of different sorts to build houses, canoes and other objects. In other words, they had access to key resources for their survival. They also extracted other products in order to exchange them for what they could not produce themselves, such as salt and cloth. For instance, they rented mines or used abandoned ones to produce gold and platinum for export. Black people also collected vegetable ivory nuts from public forests, which were transformed into buttons in Italy, Germany and the US. A small merchant class living in a couple port towns bought these natural products and exported them, thus avoiding the need to invest in or control labor, mines, or vegetable ivory groves. As a result, rural communities operated independently and created a society that was not highly differentiated. Inequality was present, however, in the great distance that separated them from the white merchants living in town. This division marked a rural-urban divide, but also the racial inequalities that signaled the continuation of disparities that had their origin in slavery and colonialism. It is to this case that we first turn.

2. The Persistence of Forests and the Formation of a Black Peasantry on the Pacific Coast

The Pacific coast is known for its endless rain and abundant forests, but also for its poverty and its predominantly black population. Colombians consider themselves a mestizo nation, that is, a people of mixed ancestry and traditions. In much of the country, this mestizo identity tends to privilege Indian and Spanish descent. However, some regions, such as the Caribbean coast, have been historically associated with their African heritage. For Colombians, the utmost black region is the Pacific coast, and for good reason. According to the 2005 census, over 80 percent of its residents consider themselves black, mulatto, or afro-descendants, compared to only 16 percent who do so on the Caribbean coast. Furthermore, there has been much less miscegenation in the Pacific, so the region is perceived as black rather than mulatto or *zambo* (the mixture of Indian and black). The size of the region, which spans 1,300 kilometers from Panama to Ecuador and covers more than eight million hectares, further magnifies

this racialized identity. It is the largest region in Latin America where black people predominate.⁴

Blackness in the Pacific lowlands is coupled with poverty. Because the northern half of the coast is a department unto itself, called Chocó, indicators for this area are easier to find than for the southern half, which is shared by three different departments whose capitals lie in the Andes. Data from Chocó gives us a good idea of the situation for the entire coast. Between 1990 and 2004, per capita GDP in Chocó was just 40 percent of the national average. In 2005, only 23 percent of households had running water and just 16 percent were connected to a sewage system (Bonet 2007). These numbers can be somewhat misleading since Chocó has a relatively large rural population whose well-being is not adequately captured through such indicators. Other social indicators point in the same direction, however. Illiteracy rates are double the national average and infant mortality is around 27 per thousand, compared to a national rate of 12 per thousand (Bonet 2007). While it is true that these figures do not account for the richness of local productive systems and the benefits enjoyed from living in a bountiful environment, there is no doubt about the hardships that local people have suffered for generations, and of the distance that separates them from the rest of the country.

Both blackness and poverty have their origins in the extractive economy that has developed in this region since Colonial times.⁵ This economy also explains the persistence of the forest. Furthermore, the way in which this economy worked after the abolition of slavery in the mid-19th century accounts for unusually high levels of autonomy attained by ex-slaves and their descendants, a relatively rare development in the history of Afro-America. Research on the emergence of free societies following the end of slavery has advanced significantly over the last 25 years. It has focused particularly on Brazil, the Caribbean, and the plantation experience: the sugar industry in Cuba and coffee production in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, for example (Scott 2009; Beckles and Sheperd 1996; Mattos 1995; Andrews 1991). This research has shown that ex-slaves wanted autonomy; for them freedom meant, above all, the ability to control much of their own lives (Rios and Mattos 2004). To attain this goal they needed access to farmland; but land in plantation economies was scarce. Contrary to their hopes, many ex-slaves became landless workers, and only a few managed to obtain plots and acquire a degree of independence. Additionally, many of this latter group only

4 About three percent of the region's population is indigenous and comprised of four different ethnicities. Since the 1980s they have been awarded 185 titles to indigenous collective properties (or *resguardos*), totaling over 1,700,000 hectares, while black rural dwellers were granted 149 titles covering five million hectares between 1996 and 2005 (Instituto Colombiano de Desarrollo Rural (INCODER) 2006; Observatorio Pacífico y Territorio 2010).

5 The arguments made in this section are developed in Claudia Leal's book manuscript, *Landscapes of Freedom: The Pacific Lowlands of Colombia, 1850-1930*.

obtained land inside the plantation, based on consuetudinary rights developed during slavery. Even when they managed to acquire land independently, they still worked part-time on the plantation, remaining dependent on their old masters. In the Pacific region of Colombia, the story is very different. Black people there achieved more autonomy than almost anywhere else in the Americas, and developed an egalitarian society thanks to a rainforest economy that did not rest exclusively on access to land and cutting down the forest.

The extractive economy of the Pacific coast began timidly in the 1600s, gaining force in the following century as black slaves were taken there to mine gold placers. These mines consisted of gold flakes and particles found in the soil of riverbeds or in sands deposited thousands of years ago in ancient streambeds. Most of the gold, therefore, was found beneath the forests that covered the alluvial plains of rivers originating in the Andes. In the 18th century, the Pacific coast and Cauca (in the Andean southwest) were the main gold producing areas of the Viceroyalty of New Granada, whose economy rested largely on the export of gold to Spain (West 1952). Mining was the first form of extraction of natural resources that developed in this region, and it has remained important ever since. It inaugurated a pattern in which the market-oriented sector of the economy (as opposed to subsistence production) was mainly comprised of activities that took materials and components from nature and turned them into commodities.

Mining in the 18th century left no riches in the lowlands and led black people to become the majority of the population. Black slaves, both African and American-born, toiled in the mines and lived in camps amidst the jungle. Once a mine ceased to be profitable, the slave gang moved up or down river, establishing a new camp wherever it resumed operations. These camps, along with Indian towns, were the most pervasive settlement units in the region. Indian towns were created as a way to congregate the surviving indigenous population, who mostly lived in Chocó, and force them to provide the mines with food. Very few whites settled in this region; those who did comprised only about five percent of the total population. Without whites, there was no urban development, as cities were conceived of as spaces for the colonizers. The most powerful slave owners lived in cities like Popayán and Cali, located in the Andes, and used their mining profits to fund commercial ventures and to develop highland haciendas where they produced beef and unrefined sugar for regional Andean markets. Partly due to colonial restrictions on commerce, as well as the environmental constraints on lowland agriculture, this elite had little interest in “developing” the region that provided the basis of its fortunes and status (Sharp 1976; Colmenares 1979; Lane 1996). In the absence of cities, haciendas, or much trade, mining generated little additional economic activity in the Pacific lowlands, and the area remained a backwater.

The particular conditions of slavery on this coast gave a larger percentage of slaves the opportunity to buy their freedom than in other slave societies. The power of owners and overseers to control slaves was greatly limited due to the small number of whites, the dispersed nature of mining, and the lack of a local police force or army. Nonetheless, while slaves could escape with relative ease, they had nowhere to establish themselves permanently since settled life was only possible on the river levees that everyone used to reach the mines (Leal 2006). As a consequence, a kind of compromise developed between masters and slaves that allowed the latter to mine gold on the weekends, their free days, and keep whatever they obtained for themselves. Years of saving allowed some slaves to buy their freedom. Mostly for this reason, free people (mostly black, but also mulatto) comprised 40 percent of the regional population by the end of the 18th century. The wars of Independence and Independence itself (1808-1821) created additional paths to freedom, so when the law of abolition finally came in 1851, few slaves remained (Arboleda 2006).

Without slavery the extractive economy persisted but in altered form. By the mid-19th century (and even before) the productivity of mining had declined as the most accessible placers had already been exploited. Furthermore, the wars of Independence significantly reduced the control that owners had over their mines and diminished their capacity and desire to maintain the reservoirs and canals needed to guarantee an adequate supply of water to work the mines. Despite the decline in production, free black people continued to procure gold. They rented mines from the ex-slave owning families and exploited abandoned mines, even buying them in a few cases. This development implied a major transformation in the lowland economy as independent miners, not wage laborers, replaced slaves. Simultaneously, a small white merchant elite developed. Throughout the second half of the 19th century, some members of the old slave owning families, as well as a few newcomers from the Andean interior, the Caribbean, and even other countries, moved into a handful of coastal settlements. They created commercial houses to buy gold as well as other natural products, such as pelts and timber, to sell outside of the region and the country. Some black people also moved into these ports and an incipient urban life slowly developed.

Despite the contraction of mining, the extractive economy expanded spatially and began to include products from the jungle and not just from the subsoil. As demand for rubber developed in the second half of the 19th century, free blacks (as well as indigenous people and a few adventurers from the Andes) began searching for black rubber trees (*Castilla elastica*). Rubber gatherers climbed on top of high trees to spot the light green leaves of the *Castilla* specimens scattered amongst the forest canopy. They felled the black rubber trees and cut numerous incisions in their trunks and

branches to extract their latex all at once. They did so to guarantee that their rubber-collecting excursions proved profitable, given that *Castilla* latex dries (and darkens) when it comes into contact with the air and thus commanded a lower price than white rubber, the better-known Amazonian product. Due to this practice, rubber extraction did not last long: in about three decades gatherers exhausted the natural supply of this product.

The commerce in vegetable ivory (*tagua*) had a much longer life, largely because the palm trees, from whose seed this marketable product was obtained, could withstand heavy harvesting. *Tagua* palms form large stands in coastal plains subject to temporary flooding. They produce large fruit-clusters that contain several seeds, which resemble a hen egg in shape and ivory in color and consistency. Because of these characteristics, they were used to make buttons, first in Italy and Germany and later in the eastern United States. Vegetable ivory palms grow in Panama, Colombia, and Ecuador; two different species, *Phytelepas seemannii* and *Phytelepas tumacana*, are found in the Pacific coast of Colombia. Because they grow relatively close to the ocean and far from the mines (which were located in the upper river drainages), the commerce in their seeds encouraged free blacks to migrate into areas that they did not occupy during colonial times. The large vegetable ivory groves found in the southern end of the region also favored the growth of a small port city, Tumaco, from which these seeds were exported. As with gold, the extractive economy that developed around this forest product was based on two new social classes: independent (black) gatherers and a tiny (and white) merchant elite.

As was the case with rubber, free blacks started collecting *tagua* seeds from the forest floor at around the time that slavery received its final blow. They continued to do so until the 1940s, when plastic replaced vegetable ivory and other materials in button manufacturing. While gatherers sometimes collected seeds from unripe fruits by knocking down the palm-tree, they mostly harvested those that had fallen to the ground. Colombian biologist Rodrigo Bernal (1998) established that a population of *Phytelepas seemannii* could withstand 86 percent of its seeds being harvested before its survival was threatened. For this reason, 80 or more years of intense exploitation did not severely impact the vegetable ivory groves.

The early end of the rubber trade in the Pacific coast of Colombia suggests that *Castilla elastica* trees and vegetable ivory palms had opposite fates. But black rubber trees are still found in the region's forests despite their decimation by the 1880s. While rubber gathering almost whipped out mature *Castilla* trees in the forests of the Pacific lowlands, there were two mitigating factors. First, the environment in which these trees

grew was left largely intact. In many of the clearings opened by the fallen trees, other *Castillas* likely grew from the seedlings that sprouted around the original tree. But there is yet another reason: as rubber prices continued to climb, local people decided to plant rubber trees, and they did so extensively. Ironically, prices plummeted as these trees started to produce, so many of them were abandoned rather than cut down, increasing their numbers near the beaches and rivers where people lived.

The persistence of the forest cover is also explained by the low impact of placer mining. Although opening a mine implied removing a section of forest, this only happened in limited areas. And once the mine was abandoned, the vegetation slowly recovered to the point that attempts to find colonial-era mines in the late-19th century proved extremely difficult because of dense foliage that hid them (Ragonnet 1895 [unpublished]). The extractive economy, therefore, altered the composition of the forest in ways we do not fully understand (due to the lack of studies). But most importantly, it did not radically transform the landscape.

Free blacks also shaped the varied environments of the Pacific pluvial forests through their subsistence activities. They took resources to feed themselves, build their houses, and make canoes. They hunted, mainly big rodents (especially the so-called *conejo* or *guagua*, *Cuniculus paca*), to the point that by the 1950s, if not earlier, game meat had become scarce. Fish from the region's rivers, mangroves, tidal lagoons, and ocean provided a more important source of protein (West 1957). Free blacks used various kinds of timber: for example, *guayacán* (*Mincuartia guianensis*) for house pilings, *barrigona* palm (*Dictyocaryum lamarckianum*) for flooring, and *chachajo* (*Aniba perutilis*), *chibugá* (*Cariniana pyriformis*), or *güino* (*Carapa guianensis*), among others, for canoes (West 1957; Gutiérrez 1924).

Although agriculture was just one among many economic activities, it gave the river levees – which provide the scenery of any journey through these lowlands – their characteristic look. Black peasants grew crops on the scant agricultural land of the levees, mainly for subsistence but also for local markets. They primarily produced and ate corn and plantains, which they complemented with other products such as taro. Sugar cane was also an important crop, for cane juice was a popular drink and, in concentrated or crystalized form, sweetened food and was used to make spirits. These crops, among a variety of others, including the distinctive breadfruit trees (*Artocarpus altilis*), introduced from Asia in the 19th century and whose edible fruits are a local favorite, highlight the ways that local people have remade the natural environment.

Access to the subsoil, forests, waterways, strips of fertile land, and the sea afforded black people independent livelihoods. In this manner, they succeeded in attaining their ultimate goal of forging an autonomous lifestyle. They organized their work schedules according to the ecological calendar, their needs, and the prices of marketable products. Critically, no overseers or employers told them what to do, when, or how. Merchants lived in town, removed from the jungles that they considered inhospitable. They bought natural products and in exchange gave gatherers and miners basic commodities, such as salt and cloth, which could not be procured from the surrounding environment. By concentrating exclusively on this import-export trade, merchants could profit without the need, and all the accompanying headaches and risks, to invest directly in the extraction of the natural resources.

The rainforest economy that developed in the Pacific coast of Colombia generated an autonomous and relatively equitable rural society. The wealthy were few and lived in the budding port cities of Quibdó and Tumaco, not in the small rural hamlets or in the dispersed homesteads that gave the river levees their peculiar look. Although some rural families fared better than others, together they formed a free peasantry that was not subject to powerful landowners who restricted their access to the lowland environment. This outcome was largely due to the marginal character of the regional economy, which limited competition over resource access. In the 19th century, gold production from this region lost its prominent place in the national economy, and vegetable ivory exports, in national terms, were relatively minor. But this black peasantry also defended their access to the region's resources. At times, entrepreneurs tried to monopolize access to vegetable ivory groves, first by claiming land titles and later by requesting a forest concession; but they had little luck. Their goal was to force *tagua* gatherers to sell the seeds exclusively to them, but local people strongly opposed such efforts. With the support of local politicians and merchants, the gatherers preserved their right to collect vegetable ivory seeds from public lands.

The competition posed by mining was much stronger and more successful, but still limited. Around the turn of the 20th century, local merchants and foreign entrepreneurs requested formal rights over nearly every possible area in the lowlands where gold deposits might be found. This included alluvial mines but also, somewhat surprisingly, the riverbeds themselves. The most common strategy was to request a mining title, but speculators also tried to validate old colonial titles and secure concessions to riverbeds. They hoped to sell their rights to foreign companies capable of investing in novel technologies, primarily hydraulic mining and dredges. Convinced that a much-needed breakthrough in lowland mining was imminent, they wanted to secure a share of the bounty. Most of this speculation proved fruitless, and the mining titles

and concessions eventually expired. But in two cases, foreign companies did indeed begin operations, altering the social relations in the areas they worked. A French company started drift mining in the Timbiquí River Basin, while the larger Chocó Pacific Mining Company introduced dredges to the San Juan River Basin. In both places, the companies established themselves as powerful actors and curtailed local people's right to mine, though never completely. Free blacks continued to mine areas that the foreign companies could not reach or profitably exploit; and in the San Juan Basin they retained their legal right to *dive*, a customary mining practice, where the dredges operated. Most importantly, though, no companies worked the other mining areas in the region (Leal 2008).

The persistent territorial control by black inhabitants, and their access to natural resources, both helped to limit social disparities. Nonetheless, inequalities did exist, some of which were embodied in the landscape itself. The well-situated, two-story houses owned by merchants, as well as the Caribbean-style homes assigned to the professional – and mostly foreign – employees of the Chocó Pacific Mining Company, clearly indicated the privileged position that a small group of people occupied in the lowland economy and society. The division was not solely determined by unequal means, but was also a question of race: the occupants of those houses invariably considered themselves to be white, unlike the vast majority of the region's population. The subordinate position of blacks also appeared in less conspicuous ways. For instance, they lacked the security of formal property rights to the territories on which their autonomy depended.

While peasants (and landowners) elsewhere usually sought to secure territorial rights through land titles, in this region, because of the nature of the extractive economy, land was not a strategic resource that people tried to appropriate. On the contrary, as we have seen, struggles and tensions developed around the subsoil and forests products rather than the land itself. Since the late-19th century, the state has considered forests to be either an obstacle to agricultural production that needed to be removed, or a valuable resource (timber, rubber, cinchona bark, vegetable ivory, etc.) that, due to its wild nature, belonged to the nation. In the latter case, the state claimed exclusive property rights, underscored by such labels as “national forests,” and only granted temporary permits or concessions, in exchange for a fee, to parties interested in exploiting these resources. The result was that the people who inhabited such territories before they were declared public and unalienable, were subsequently prevented from acquiring formal land rights. Any chance of addressing this issue was complicated by long-standing antagonism to collective property rights. And even where land and mine titles might have been obtained, local poverty, widespread illiteracy, and the great

distances to the centers of power effectively foreclosed this possibility to the black inhabitants of this forested frontier.

3. The Growth of Pastures and Inequality in the Caribbean Lowlands

By the mid-20th century, conditions on the Caribbean coast differed dramatically from those of the Pacific. In both, the majority of residents lived in poverty with a dearth of government services. The Caribbean region, however, was much better integrated into the rest of the nation. Much of it was covered in grass and cattle rather than forest. And internally it was deeply divided: a small group of ranchers controlled the bulk of the territorial base. These differences were not always so stark. In the mid-19th century, the extent of forest cover and the existence of a relatively independent peasantry were analogous to the situation on the Pacific coast. What happened over the subsequent century that made the histories of these two regions diverge so sharply?

Although the Caribbean plains have long been the most important cattle producer in the country, much of the region was originally covered by trees rather than grass. While there were some natural grasslands, these were not the wide-open plains of the Llanos, east of the Andes, or the Pampas. Instead, the areas of upland savanna, generally rising from 30 to 150 meters above sea level and dotted with trees, were really “a series of meadows of varying size, separated one from the other by belts of jungle of various widths in which numerous cleared areas and small farms are found” (Vergara y Velasco 1974: 603). Beyond them were vast expanses of forest. Traveling through the Caribbean coast in 1823, Gaspard-Théodore Mollien (1992: 65) described the region as “magnificent for those who love wild and disorderly nature. All the land is covered by very tall trees and luxurious vegetation. [...] Little has the hand of man cultivated in these vast extensions”. In the 1850s, the lands west of the Sinú River, south of Montería, and south of the San Jorge River were essentially unsettled and covered by thick forest (Striffler 1980). To the north, the Sabanas de Bolívar were contained by the forested ridges and steep escarpments of the Montes de María. As late as 1917, the forest along the Magdalena River started at Magangué and extended all the way to La Dorada in Cundinamarca (Pennell 1918). In general, these were dry tropical forests, adapted to the annual summer drought. But as the rain gradient increased moving east to west and north to south, they became progressively taller and denser as they merged into the humid tropical forests of the Pacific coast, the middle Magdalena River Valley, and the lower Cauca River Basin.

Prior to the 1850s, the extent of the forest limited the total available forage and the growth of the cattle population. While the Colombian Llanos were said to contain about half a million animals prior to the wars of Independence, a cattle census from 1766 around Cartagena, in the Sabanas de Bolívar, and along the San Jorge River counted just 57,000 head (Dorta 1962). This did not include the animals raised by dispersed peasant families, nor the other significant livestock regions of Ayapel, the Depression of Mompós, and the lands east of the Magdalena River. But the relatively small numbers underscore the limited forage base.

Additionally, both the grasses and the streams of the upland savannas dried up during the dry summer months, from December to April. During this period, cattle relied on the second kind of natural grasslands of the coastal plains: seasonally inundated lowland savannas. Because of the low elevation of so much of the coastal plains, the region's numerous rivers have trouble discharging the winter rains and overflow into a complex network of floodplain marshes known as *ciénagas*. In these, it is the annual flooding, not the lack of water or poor soils, that prevents the growth of trees. In the dry season, these marshes slowly drain to reveal rich, carpet-like expanses of grass, providing critical summer grazing close to permanent sources of water. For cattle herders, the limiting factor here was the need for dry ground during the winter floods. There thus developed a symbiotic relationship, and annual transhumance, between savanna and *ciénaga*.

The extent of the forest had another important consequence: it helped to create a space in which the growing peasantry could maintain a measure of independence from the region's landed elite. Although the *gran hacienda* controlled a fair amount of land by the first half of the 19th century, it was a relatively weak institution. A few landed elites were rich and powerful, but most, judged by the number of cattle and slaves they owned, were relatively small (Dorta 1962; Posada Carbó 1996; Tovar 1980). Their leverage over the peasantry was also limited by the accessibility of land. Communally-held properties (either *ejidos* or *resguardos*) were one source of land. As part of a late-18th century policy to exert more control over a dispersed population – beyond the reach of Church, state, and *hacendado* – Bourbon officials founded and resettled a large number of towns and Indian communities around the Caribbean lowlands (Herrera 2002; Helg 2004). In doing so, they granted and reconfirmed the existence of communal lands for each settlement, helping to bolster the relative independence of their residents. Additionally, landed elites frequently exerted only modest control over the forested margins of their estates. Peasant squatters often enjoyed relative impunity in their refusal to pay rent or labor service, especially following the partial abandonment of numerous properties during the wars of independence and the

subsequent economic depression (Fals Borda 1979). The existence of public lands on which peasants could settle further undermined the coercive power of landed elites. Such *baldíos* existed in the interstices of landed estates, away from the riverways and *savannas*, and especially to the south, where a wide-open frontier offered a difficult but feasible life.

In the mid-19th century, rising demand for cattle and the diffusion of new grasses began to change the geography and practice of ranching as well as the position of the peasantry. Starting in the late-1840s, a series of tropical commodities – tobacco, indigo, *cinchona*, coffee – finally managed, in fits and starts, to slowly pull Colombia's economy out of its post-Independence slump (Ocampo 1984). As the economy began to grow so too did the demand for beef, hides, and tallow. For example, in the early 1850s, wages for workers broadly connected to the tobacco economy rose 200 to 300 percent and increasing numbers of them began to eat beef. As a result, the price of beef doubled and that of hides, used to pack the tobacco, quadrupled (Camacho Roldán 1946; Safford 1966; Nieto Arteta 1996). This stimulated ranchers to expand their herds and attracted new comers to the cattle industry, all of which required the occupation or creation of new grasslands.

The recent introduction of African grasses greatly aided this process of expansion. These grasses, *pará* (*Brachiaria mutica*) and *guinea* (*Panicum maximum*), had arrived in the New World on slave ships and began to spread around tropical Latin America in the 18th century (Parsons 1972). Arriving in Colombia in the early-19th century, they were first treated as a curiosity and ornamental. Their transition to pasture grass, and their diffusion around the lowlands, coincided with the mid-century rise in demand. These grasses, the product of a co-evolutionary history with large grazing animals absent in Latin America since the end of the Pleistocene, were more nutritious and resilient than most native grasses. Pastures planted in such grasses enabled ranchers to dramatically increase stocking rate as well as produce heavier animals, improve reproduction rates, and reduce the time spent fattening (Van Ausdal 2012). The grasses also tended to grow faster and denser than native species. This helped them compete against the plants that colonized forest clearings, making the work of establishing a pasture quicker and easier. The new African imports thus made it both desirable and economically feasible to covert tropical forests to “artificial” pastures on a much larger scale than previously possible. From first-hand experience, Louis Striffler (1994: 103) reported that:

The first trials with artificial grasses for the rainy season [circa 1850] were so successful that all the stock raisers hurried to adopt the reform. They cleared the virgin forests around the *ciénagas* and [...] planted the grass.

Thus, with growing demand and a new, environmental technology, ranchers began to expand beyond the natural confines of the colonial cattle industry.

While the so-called revolution in ranching spread slowly and unevenly, overtime the growing demand for land by ranchers produced revolutionary consequences. For one, ranchers progressively transformed the landscape of the Caribbean lowlands into a grassland. By 1920, the cattle population of the Department of Bolívar (the western half of the Caribbean region) had grown several times over to about one million head, and by 1960 it had doubled to almost two million (Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística (DANE) 1962). The region's natural grasslands played an important role in this expansion, though many of them had to be "improved" to increase their stocking rate and productivity. Traveling through the Sabanas de Bolívar in 1918, the botanist Francis Pennell (1918: 135) was disappointed to discover "a land kept green by the drought-resistant *guinea* and *pará*-grasses. So solidly are these grown that once in the primitive open there appears to be no native flora left". Nonetheless, it was clearing the forest to plant pasture that enabled this dramatic increase in the cattle herd and caught the attention of foreign observers. In 1917, Robert B. Cunninghame Graham (1917) remarked how the "greater portion of the country was originally covered with virgin forest, which has been cleared and burnt to make cattle pastures". By the 1940s, it was estimated that there were over four million hectares of land in grass, or some 65 percent of the Department of Bolívar's land base (Contraloría General de la República 1942). This figure is probably high, but it points to the increasing awareness of the "relentless destruction of the forest" and its negative impact on local climates, dwindling forest resources, and river transport through increased silting (Badel 1999: 304). By the mid-20th century, various communities previously been known as "forest folk" (*montañeros*) had become *sabaneros* (Gordon 1957: 62).

The growth of pastures on the Caribbean plains went hand-in-hand with the progressive marginalization of its peasantry. Although it shouldn't be exaggerated, the availability of forested land afforded an important degree of independence. It meant, for instance, that labor was mediated by wages rather than tenancy arrangements. To acquire workers, ranchers also frequently found themselves obliged to offer advances – debts that generated more losses than they created a captive labor force (Ocampo 2007; Van Ausdal 2009a). Ranchers' attempt to use the coercive power of the state to augment their control was only moderately successful. What worked much better was

their progressive monopolization of the land – and the elimination of forest resources – which undermined the autonomy of the peasantry. This process also developed unevenly: it occurred first on the Sabanas de Bolívar and then tended to follow the advance of the agrarian frontier. In the late 1920s, ranchers in the area of the upper Sinú and lower Cauca rivers were finally able to end the practice of advancing wages. During the following decade, land had become scarce enough in many regions that sharecropping grass – giving peasants free access to forested land or fallow (*rastrojo*) in exchange for returning the land a couple years later planted in grass – started to become widespread.

The typical way that this story of growing monopolization and eroding independence has been told is illustrated by a recent report by the Grupo de Memoria Histórica.⁶ To explain the origins of the agrarian structure in the Caribbean, the report (2010: 64) relies on the “law of three steps”, identified by Orlando Fals Borda (1976: 41), in which the land, first cleared by peasant colonizers, was then appropriated by small or medium-sized ranchers or intermediaries who “in turn cede before the pressures of a *latifundista*. [...] The tricks, extortions, swindles, and deaths implied by this law have saturated the history of the struggle for land throughout the region”.

In other words, the expansion of ranching has rested on the unrelenting and coercive appropriation of the land and labor of peasants who first settled the frontier. While there is much truth to this vision, it oversimplifies the process.

Ranchers also began to appropriate communal lands. These lands, traditionally divided between agricultural and grazing areas, were open to all residents of a community, with any excess frequently rented out to help fund local government. Although property rights were vested in the community, any improvements (*mejoras*) that an individual made to the land were considered to be private property. So called permanent crops, such as orchards and sugarcane, which continued to bear fruit into the future, were the traditional basis of such alienable rights. While it was difficult for one person to accumulate much land with such crops, the advent of planted pasture changed the dynamics of accumulation. Since grass was a perennial crop, pastures developed on communal property effectively privatized the land. Raising cattle – by nature an extensive form of land use where the animal did the work of harvesting the crop and walking to market – enabled local elites to appropriate a disproportionate share of communal lands. At times this enclosure movement was an outright land grab, such as when the important rancher, Julián Patrón, claimed that Ciénaga de la Leche was public land, rather than a communal grazing area for the town of Tolú, and

6 This group was part of the National Commission on Reparations and Reconciliation.

applied to the national government for title to the area (Personería de Tolú 1909). More often, though, it occurred more insidiously as ranchers bought peasants' *mejoras* and slowly consolidated them into de facto private pastures. Some communities recognized this threat and tried to prohibit the planting of grass on communal lands altogether (Anonymous 1884).

Additionally, much of the work of converting forest to pasture, whether on private property, in communal areas, or on public lands, was undertaken by ranchers rather than simply appropriating lands cleared by peasants or, before the 1930s, relying on land-for-pasture exchanges. Such modalities did exist, but the private correspondence of ranchers from around the Caribbean lowlands points to the use of wage labor as a far more important means by which to develop pastures (Van Ausdal 2009a; Ocampo 2007). Ranchers relied on resident tenants, hired temporary workers from neighboring communities, or used labor contractors to bring in work gangs for fixed periods. They paid laborers to cut down the large trees and clear the underbrush; to create firebreaks and burn the felled vegetation; to plant the grass seed or clippings; and then to carry out the two, labor-intensive rounds of weeding that helped the grass outcompete the various plants that colonized forest clearings. All told, it took about two-and-a-half years before the pasture was fully ready. More significantly, it took about 43 days of labor – the equivalent to about \$30 pesos in the early 1920s – to produce one hectare of grass. By contrast, the average cost of a hectare of undeveloped land was a little more than \$3 pesos (Van Ausdal 2009b). In other words, the expense of ranching (besides the animals themselves) was more in growing grass than the cost of the land.

The significance of paying attention to the labor and costs of converting forest to pasture is that it makes us rethink the logic of ranching. It is often repeated, in Colombia and around Latin America, that raising cattle has little to do with producing beef for market. Instead, cattle are primarily a means to an end: “land, not profits from beef production, is what draws many of them [elites] into cattle ranching in the first place” (Nations 1992: 194). Territorial control was a way to demonstrate social prestige, acquire political power, capture government rents, speculate, and subjugate a potentially intransigent labor force. A group of Mormons, who tried to consolidate their rights over a huge colonial estate in the Caribbean lowlands over the first half of the 20th century, recognized that cattle “are one of the best means [...] to show dominion and the exercise of possession over one’s property” (Knight 1943). But their failure to establish effective dominion in the Tierras de Loba stemmed precisely from what most scholars ignore: the materiality of the forest. The Mormons couldn’t simply put cattle out to graze in order to reinforce their claims because doing so required providing them with forage. Their control over the property slowly slipped away because they were

never able to raise sufficient capital to convert enough forestland to pasture. Land was cheap in the Caribbean lowlands, and if someone wanted to accumulate it for status or political power, he or she could easily buy it. Pasture, on the other hand, was relatively expensive. Because of the effort involved in clearing the forest to plant grass, we cannot assume that “ulterior” motives were the driving force behind the expansion of ranching and the environmental transformation of the Caribbean lowlands. Instead, the main reason why ranchers went to the expense of creating pastures was that they expected to earn a profit from selling the animals that grazed them. In other words, an environmental history of ranching helps us better understand its underlying economic logic.

By 1960, the dominance of ranching and ranchers was obvious. Grass covered 80 percent of the Caribbean lowlands, and just 12 percent of rural properties monopolized 82 percent of the land (DANE 1962). The origin of this unequal agrarian structure was closely tied to the expansion of cattle ranching, though not in the straightforward way often portrayed. Ranchers developed pasture in different kinds of tenure regimes and appropriated land in various ways. The dispossession of the peasantry was significant, but it was not the only – or the primary – means by which ranching expanded. Ranchers also exercised considerable influence over the political system, which facilitated their expropriation of peasant farms, infiltration of communal property, and de facto appropriation of public land. The exercise of political power, however, was not the principal source of economic gain.

Much of what drove ranching was its inherent advantages over agriculture. Raising cattle was easier as well as less risky. While the cyclical drought and flooding on the Caribbean plains were a problem for agriculture – requiring either irrigation or flood control – livestock could take advantage of these seasonal rhythms. Additionally, ranching had economies of scale – unlike farming until the advent of mechanization in the late 1940s – and appeared profitable. A common refrain throughout Colombia was that the two best rural businesses were, first, a well-run ranch and, second, a poorly-run ranch. It was these advantages, for example, that stymied US efforts to induce Caribbean ranchers to grow rice for the Canal Zone during the 1940s: large land owners

are more interested in cattle than anything else. Two year old steers can be raised or purchased at a cost of \$40.00 to \$50.00 pesos per head. They can then be carried on grass for 3 years, with but little expense for herdsman, etc. and sold when 5 years old at an estimated net profit of \$40.00 to \$50.00 pesos per head (Atwood 1944).

The predominance of ranching was also a function of the relative weakness of the peasant economy. This weakness derived from various sources: the lack of state support, the difficulty and cost of marketing, an insufficient and inferior land base, and the disincentives to invest in long-term improvements. But a key aspect was also the low productivity of peasant agriculture. This last statement may sound odd given the important tradition of emphasizing the inverse relationship between farm size and productivity. For example, based on Colombian data, Albert Berry (1972: 406) argued that: "Total social factor productivity emerges higher for smaller farms for almost all plausible combinations of assumptions about the social opportunity cost of factors".

More concretely, numerous studies show that it took about the same amount of labor, the equivalent to about 40 days, to grow one hectare of corn or rice as it did to produce a hectare of grass. Since the value of the food crop was greater than the weight gain per head of cattle, peasant agriculture appears to be more productive. The problem is that agriculture was a seasonal activity while pastures were perennial. Once established, the annual maintenance on a pasture was one to two days per hectare for the lifetime of the pasture, which might be 10 to 15 years. While ranching had high up-front costs, over the long run the low labor requirements gave it an advantage over peasant agriculture. It also provided an incentive to accumulate extensively. Rather than invest in inputs to produce a high output per hectare, it was often seen as more profitable, and less risky, to invest in land. For example, a World Bank (1975: Annex 7, Table 8) project from the early 1970s showed that while the gross profits (not including labor) from cotton production were 4.5 times that of ranching, because the labor requirements were 8.6 times greater, the return on investment was essentially the same.

4. Conclusion

We began by juxtaposing the environmental histories of Colombia's lowland coastal regions: while the forests of the Caribbean have disappeared since the mid-19th century, those of the Pacific remain standing. The ecological character of each region and their respective economic organization contribute to our understanding of these disparate trajectories. While environmental conditions did not determine the divergent histories, they did shape what was feasible in each place. The extreme humidity of the Pacific lowlands, plus the lack of fertile soil, hindered the development of commercial agriculture: yields were low and the risks were high. Ecological conditions also hampered the development of ranching. The big push by ranchers into Latin America's rainforests only began in a significant way in the 1950s. And even then, speculation and subsidies were an important early incentive given the rapid decline in soil fertility

and the persistent problem of weeds (Hecht 1985). Because dry tropical forests are much easier to convert into pastures, it is not surprising that ranching developed on the Caribbean coast while collecting valuable forest products and small-scale mining remained prominent in the Pacific.

These economic activities, in turn, shaped the logic of accumulation in each region. In the Pacific, a merchant elite found it easier to rely on the region's black peasantry to supply them with the commodities they desired rather than organize the extractive process. They captured profits by controlling trade networks rather than investing in land, labor, or technology. While some of these profits went into their two-story houses and urban accoutrements that legitimized their position, many were lost in economic endeavors that either failed (rubber planting) or ultimately depended on the extractive economy itself (steam navigation). By contrast, the ranching elite of the Caribbean profited by using cattle to harvest their grass crop. Their primary focus was production, which required controlling large areas of land, given the extensive nature of ranching, as well as its ecological transformation. Moreover, the profits financed further land appropriation and forest clearance.

Paying attention to the environmental aspects of ranching on the Caribbean coast helps us better understand the region's social history and its inequalities, not just landscape transformation. Rather than simply view the expansion of cattle over the landscape as an abstract expression of political power, or a story of primitive accumulation, the process of transforming forest to pasture also highlights the economic exigencies of ranching as well as its productive advantages. This environmental transformation wrought by cattle ranchers also exacerbated internal social differences by concentrating productive resources in relatively few hands. While the peasantry was never well-off, until the mid-19th century it was relatively independent. Over time, however, the expansion of ranching progressively undermined their independence, which depended on the existence of the forest as farmland and as a source of natural resources for subsistence and commerce. Despite the frequent criticisms of ranchers for using land inefficiently, they consolidated their territorial control in large measure by transforming the landscape: grass helped to privatize communal lands and claim public lands on the forested frontier. Its perennial nature made matters worse: as pastures spread, not only did the spaces where peasants could sustain themselves diminish, but so too did the labor requirements of ranchers. By the late 1960s, the accumulating social disparities helped ignite the Caribbean lowlands as an epicenter of the most important peasant movement in Latin America at the time (Zamosc 1986).

In the case of the Pacific coast, the particularities of its rainforest economy kept social disparities in check. The independence of the black peasantry, which formed following

the demise of slavery, was based on maintaining ties with the outside world, not severing them. While supplying natural resources to the region's merchant elite was key to their livelihood, the character of the extraction process was such that despite its power and privilege, this white elite did little to interfere in their lives. Given the marginal character of the local economy, and the difficulty of directly overseeing the extractive process, the elite did not attempt to control the region's resources and territory. Left to their own devices, black peasants survived by using the resources of the forest; furthermore, they appropriated and reshaped this landscape, thereby inscribing in it the freedom they most valued. In the process, they created a much more equitable society than that which emerged in the Caribbean. Their autonomy, however, was predicated on, and reinforced by their marginality to national life. Images of a primitive, intractable forest were also used to describe its inhabitants, naturalizing the region's poverty and peripheral status. By contrast, the development of pastures on the Caribbean symbolized the triumph of civilization and national integration.

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