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Garifuna Youth in Nicaragua:

Staying, Leaving and the Meaning of Home

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Orinoco, Nicaragua

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Introduction

The Garifuna are an ethnic group descended from a mix of African and Amerindian people. They are also known as Garifune or Black Caribs. An estimated 200,000 live in Central America and the United States. The term Garifuna refers to an ethnicity, community, individual and also a language. There are 3,500 Garifuna in Nicaragua and they live mostly in RAAS, the Región Autónoma del Atlántica Sur, in five communities in the Peal Lagoon basin: Orinoco, Marshal Point, Brown Bank, St. Vincent and La Fe.

Today, the Garifuna community or communities are at once under threat from exterior definitions and oppressions and also proving themselves capable of developing and defining themselves. Traditional Garifuna identity, in the form of language, arts and lifestyle, is at great risk and the response is a cultural rescue movement. Other problems mostly derive from poverty, unemployment, lack of education, land disputes, drugs\(^1\) and teen pregnancy. The Nicaraguan Garifuna community, centered in Orinoco, is distinguished from Central American Garifuna by many qualities and conditions, the principle of which is their involvement and active role in an autonomous region.

My particular interest is the Garifuna youth. The stories, options and choices of the Garifuna youth seem an important window through which to view the greater community. In Orinoco and other Garifuna communities, there are simply no jobs in the community and fishing, the primary economy, is quickly becoming less sustainable. The realities of early pregnancy, education and poverty both expel youth from the community and bind them to it. Some youth who want to leave cannot, some who leave to find education in Bluefields or beyond are often unable to return to their communities

\(^1\) Many Garifuna communities stand in the way of Columbian drug routes.
for lack of employment. I decided to organize my investigation around the possibilities and complications of both staying in and leaving the community.

**Methodology**

I have been studying the Garifuna loosely for nearly a year. I am a Mellon Mays scholar and I decided to dedicate my Mellon undergraduate research to better understanding the Garifuna community as it exists in Central America and also in its immigrant populations in the United States. Last semester, I designed an independent study with my mentor Robert O’Meally in which I read most of the available English literature on the Garifuna (the collection is limited), and also studied research techniques. In the future I hope to hear from Garifuna youth in Los Angeles and New York.

I am a Comparative Ethnic Studies major at Columbia University and am also completing the Creative Writing Program. These are the two lenses with which I have approached my Garifuna research thus far. As far as ethnic studies, the Garifuna community is an obvious attraction as a case study of how ethnicity can form and maintain itself within its landscape. In so far as my Creative Writing background, I am as interested in Garifuna expression and also my own expression. I decided to approach this project through a series of conversations. It is with both ethnic studies and creative writing in mind that I give final authority to the young voices. Much of what I write, both in my own voice and in the voice of the youth, is not academic fact. However, I think that the relationships, conversations and experiences speak clearly for themselves.

I left contradictions and repetitions as they were because I believe in their significance.

There are several published versions of the Garifuna condition, many of which focus on the community’s history or on the cultural rescue. I chose to hear from the youth for several reasons. The Garifuna community stands at an important moment of
definition and I feel that no demographic better manifests the realities of that definition than the youth. In the United States I work with teenagers in supplementary educational program. My most interesting experiences have come from facilitating writing workshops. I think youth voices are not given sufficient credit. If ethnic communities are silenced, so are young communities. I have formatted my paper as a series of conversations with youth in Bluefields and Orinoco. The bulk of my research was collected in the three weeks I spent speaking with both youth and adults from both ends of the river. My paper depends primarily on conversations with the youth.

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A Beginning: Our Creation Stories

Nearly three years ago I ended up in Livingston, Guatemala if not by coincidence than by a very casual guide book inspired curiosity. Africans in Guatemala. I had no idea what it would look like. It was my year off between high school and college and everything I did on that trip was hurried. Livingston gave me pause. I met a man who walked me to the top of a hill, planted down with pineapples, and said his ancestors had come from Africa on two slave ships. They had revolted. They had freed themselves and had been free ever since. It was glorious and very romantic how he talked about his people. Over the next three years I would hear maybe a dozen versions of the Garifuna creation story. The most academically sponsored of which begins in 1635 when two Spanish ships carrying slaves to the West Indies from East Africa were shipwrecked near the island of St. Vincent. The slaves escaped the sinking ships, inhabited the island and mixed with the Caribs or Amerindians, forming the Garifuna. What followed were a series of colonial wars and manipulations the high points of which were the French settlers’ alliance with the Garifuna and the British invasion of St. Vincent. The Caribs surrendered to the British in 1796 and the Garifuna were deported
to Roatán, an island off what is today Honduras. They later petitioned the Spanish authorities to be allowed to settle on the mainland and eventually they spread along the Caribbean coast of Central America. Garifuna arrived in Nicaraguan in 1870 in the Pearl Lagoon basin. Brothers John and Joseph Sambola called their first community St. Vincent.

I visited St. Vincent. Today it is a scattering of houses, a primary school and one rusting train engine slowing sinking into a low cliff: a reminder of a once prosperous banana business. The woman I was with called it “our historical site.” She wanted us to take pictures. I asked her if this St. Vincent was named for the original island, but she did not know what I was referring to and said it was named for the first settlement in Honduras. It seems that just as it was important for the Garifuna in Honduras to name their first settlement after St. Vincent, it was also important for the Sambolas to name their first settlement after the first settlement in Honduras. The Garifuna have always been looking home.

I asked nearly everyone I talked to about the Garifuna history. The history is not taught in the schools in Orinoco but according to some young people, passed on through generations and most often, through the family. Several of the young people I talked to responded surely that they were aware of their history. When I pressed, they traced their origin to the Sambolas. Historical memory seems pretty short with the Orinoco Garifuna, but nonetheless it is adamantly grounded in the idea of origin and home.

I do not vouch for any one history over another. Although most accounts look more or less the same, they are varied. These riffs on the history say much more about the people than any of the accounts you can find online or in the few books written on

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2 One study shows that Orinoco Garifuna can generally only trace their family lineage two generations back.
the people. Perhaps the people in those two ships revolted. Perhaps, as I was told so often in Orinoco, the history begins with John and Joseph Sambola in 1870.

* * *

This is Not Home: Getting educated in Bluefields

Bluefields is the capital of RAAS, the Región Autónoma del Atlántica Sur. Its population was 45,000 in 2000 making it by far the largest city in a region of small communities and towns. Its primary industry is fishing but, as on the rest of the coast, this industry does not suffice. It suffers through its economy, its natural disasters and also through federal neglect. For me, to be in Bluefields, is to be in limbo. It is both busy and tranquil at the same time and it possesses the personality of not yet having realized itself. It is very much a city in the making. It is deciding now, to what extent it will be a passing port and to what extent a destination. It is deciding to what extent it will realize its autonomy.

Legal autonomy was achieved in 1987 and with it came the region’s first two universities. In pre-autonomy days, there was no higher education on the coast. Today, Bluefields Indiana and Caribbean University (BICU) and Universidad de Regiones Autonomas de la Costa Caribe (URACCAN) are monuments to the access and progress made possible by autonomy. The two universities have achieved interesting work with the various ethnic groups and communities in RAAS, and specifically with Orinoco. Both universities made an attempt through grants, research projects and student scholarships, to help support Orinoco and the other Garifuna communities in rescuing and protecting their identity and in developing themselves through education. For those Garifuna students who want them, scholarships are made available. Of course, these students have to make it through fifth year and once they graduate, the scholarships do not necessarily suffice.
When I arrived in Bluefields I wanted to connect with young people who had left their Garifuna communities to be educated in Bluefields and I began with the universities. My advisor for my project was Víctor Obando, professor of sociology at the URACCAN, and it was through the URACCAN that I conducted most of my research in Bluefields.

Kenzy Sambola3
On activism, development and home

On my second morning in Bluefields I meet with Kenzy Sambola at the URACCAN. The university, founded in 1992, is humble but it takes its landscape seriously. Its low buildings stand at the top of a hill providing panoramic views of Bluefields and the water beyond. On the walls of the outside entrance hall are two poems by Víctor Obando, hand written in paint, commemorating the anniversaries of the institution. They talk about self determination and autonomy.

Kenzy arrives a little late and harried. She is giving a talk that day on property rights at a university conference. She is thirty-one and in her final year of her masters in Social Anthropology. Her bachelor degree was Sociology. She says she studies sociology because she had “an uneasiness to know about her community and about the Garifuna culture.” She also thinks it is a way to contribute to her community. Kenzy is obviously used to interviews. She is accustomed to talking about her work, her people and her home. Aside from dedicating her academic work to studying her people, she is also the president of the Organización Afro-Garifuna Nicaraguense (OAGANIC). Later, I will find several interviews with Kenzy online and in newspapers. Her name is also the first one I get from everyone in Bluefields when I ask about the Garifuna.

3 My interview with Kenzy Sambola took place at the URACCAN on April 19th, 2006. All quotations and opinions in her voice came from this interview.
Kenzy was raised in Orinoco but, along with many other Orinoco locals, was born in the Bluefields hospital. After studying through primary school in Orinoco, Kenzy returned to Bluefields at the age of twelve to study secondary, because as yet, Orinoco did not offer secondary education. She is not the only one who moved to Bluefields to study secondary. For those who wanted to complete high school, Bluefields used to be the only option. Even today, there are Garifuna students who move to Bluefields to complete secondary: some for the better resources, some to be with relatives. Kenzy, however, was one of only two people in her peer group from Orinoco who continued on to university. This year, of seven hundred students in total, there are eighteen Garifuna enrolled in the URACCAN.

Kenzy is the president of OAGANIC, a Garifuna association started in 1998 and made legal three years ago. It is made up of both professionals and community members who work with the Garifuna community to rescue language, culture and spirituality. They organize workshops, events, exchanges with other Central American Garifuna communities and have also printed books for schools to teach the Garifuna language. Kenzy believes OAGANIC should be transparent, diverse and representative of the community. The last goal she lists for OAGANIC is less tangible and very ambitious: to provide conditions in Orinoco so that young people who leave to study can return home. She is thinking in terms of employment. A lot of young people study nursing, she tells me, but they don’t usually end up working at home. Jobs do not exist in Orinoco to sustain the population leaving to get educated.

She has two ideas for economic development. The first is farming. There is talk of a highway attaching the now isolated Atlantic Coast with the rest of Nicaragua and Kenzy thinks Orinoco should be ready. Planting and selling produce could link Orinoco up to the market. Kenzy also thinks that planting could secure their land. She, along
with the rest of RAAS’ Indigenous and black population, is worried about the Mestizos who are migrating to the coast and moving closer and closer in traditional Garifuna land. The land, as yet, is untitled and very vulnerable. Coming and “doing a farm” is a way that people give to, and invest in, the community. Her other idea is tourism. Kenzy talks about tourism in the sense of conservation, an effort to preserve the forests and wilderness of Garifuna communities and also offering tours to visitors.

All Kenzy wants to talk about home. “Everything for me is home. Everything I think about is home.” I will hear this many more times but it never resounds quite as deeply as it does with Kenzy because she is not sentimental. She is talking about a long future of struggle, about protection and investment. Bluefields, where she lives and raises her kids, is not her home. She says she doesn’t even know anything about her Bluefields neighbourhood. She returns home to Orinoco every chance she gets.

She says there has to be sacrifice to make the difference in the community. In fact, Kenzy will not take on full time jobs because she says she needs to have time for her studies and for her organization. Ok, I think, academia and activism are all well and good but a girl’s got to eat and Kenzy has already referred to her three children. It turns out I am not the first one to ask her about paying jobs and it is a sensitive subject. She says that some people in her community say she is “regis,” or proud, because she is qualified to work and she does not bring in very much money. Kenzy is clear. She says that she insists that her employers pay her for her capacity. She does consultations and workshops. She makes ends meet. She concedes that her field of work could not sustain anybody else. There is probably room for only one Kenzy Sambola: Orinoco sociologist and activist (so far as paying jobs go).

4 The Nicaraguan Garifuna have been very involved in the struggle to attain land right. Law 445, a demarcation law, has recognized their right to territory but as yet the community has no paper in hand.
I ask her if there are many youth like her and she shakes her head. She sees unhealthy changes in the community. People used to be more interested in service to their community. It was something instilled by the parents but she doesn’t know if it really exists anymore. She has just come back from Easter in Orinoco and is disheartened. Every year the community goes to the cemetery to spend time with their ancestors and to clean the graves. This year people didn’t show up; Unhealthy changes.

**Daviel Bennet**

*On being a leader, being a father and baseball*

Daviel Bennet is one of the better mannered young men I have talked to in a while. For me, living alone in Bluefields with one other young woman has proved to be different than living with a group of men and women in Managua. It is not everyday *piropo* attentions. It is cat calls, hissing, kissing and grabbing and it has become so unbearable that my companion and I have begun to stay indoors or to curse every man we pass outside. When I shake Daviel’s hand, he calls me Ma’am. I love him.

Daviel is twenty-one and is from Marshall Point. He moved to Bluefields in 2002. There is no secondary school in Marshall Point, only a primary. For secondary, the students must walk to Orinoco. Daviel completed his first and second year of secondary in Orinoco but the walk, he tells me very seriously, became too dangerous. I ask him why. I am imagining bandits hiding behind trees. He tells me gravely about dangerous animals and snakes, lots of snakes. When it rains, the water rises and the bridge is unsafe to cross. He decided to complete secondary in Bluefield but returns home for vacations.

Daviel is in his first year at the URACCAN studying eco-tourism. It is a five year degree. He originally wanted to study theology, and did so for a year. He said he

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5 My interview with Daviel Bennet took place at the URACCAN on April 26th, 2006. All quotations and opinions in his voice came from this interview.
“he had a disappointment and the urge to stop.” He doesn’t go on and I let it alone.

Daviel thinks eco-tourism is essential. “On the Atlantic coast we have many riches but we need to be prepared, to be able to administrate them and to take care of the good things we have. We have many visitors. We need to know how to receive them.” In the future, after he graduates, Daviel wants to travel around the Atlantic Coast and get to know it. He wants to “build it up.” And coming home? “I would want to settle down in my home but it’s difficult to find jobs.”

We talk about his peers. He is the youngest of seven siblings. His two brothers did not finish secondary. Daviel says his parents were very poor and could not afford to pay. They left to make money at sea and now both work on big boats in the States. He says many of his friends and cousins feel it is difficult to study because they want money in hand. School can be expensive and “they feel it hard.” They see that many people who are getting educated in Nicaragua are not getting employed afterwards. College does not guarantee employment but fishing and farming are a sure thing.

And university life is hard. Daviel is studying with a scholarship. They give him 500 cordobas a month. “Sometimes it cover, sometimes not…sometimes it comes too late, we have to be borrowing.” Sometimes his brothers support him when the scholarship does not satisfy but his brothers have their own families to maintain.

We slowly make it back round to Daviel’s passion: the church. Daviel is worried that people in his community are “falling out of religion.” He cites alcoholism and drugs which he thinks are destroying the community. He thinks the church should preach on alcoholism but they don’t. It turns out Daviel has a lot of ideas about the church. He says they should give charlas (workshops) for the children. He thinks the problems (drugs, alcohol and early pregnancy) are running from generation to generation and that
the community needs someone to instruct. He is Moravian and there is a Moravian
church in Marshall Point but, at this moment, no priest. They have been using the priest
from the Anglican church. This is one of the reasons why he wanted to go into theology.
He thinks his community needs leaders. Daviel says he wanted to lead his community.

So I ask him what happened. Why did you stop studying theology?

He was at the seminary for a year when, as he put it, “one girl did get pregnant.”
The seminary did not look kindly on relations outside of marriage and he felt he had to
give it up. He says he hopes to return to theology in the future. The mother is from
Marshall Point and is now fifteen, and the child, Roger, is one. I ask who maintains the
child. He says when a little work comes up, he helps but Roger lives with the mothers’
family. The mother is back in secondary and wants to finish, maybe even go to college.
Daviel says this would be a good idea. He tells me it is a great responsibility being a
father. We both agree it is also beautiful.

Daviel walks me down from the URACCAN to catch a cab. This weekend, he is
going home to play for Marshall Point in the baseball tournament. I ask if they are
having a good season. He smiles,

“We plan to win the championship.”

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Certainly there are educational opportunities in Bluefields better than ever
before but even now getting educated in the capital seems a challenge. Daviel and
Kensy were exceptions: two of maybe thirty Garifuna youth pursuing higher education.
Also for those who begin university, many do not finish. I am told that most Garifuna
college students drop out for financial reasons. Dropping out of school, or not
completing school has become a theme. Both Kensy and Daviel expressed concerns
about the amount of Garifuna students who were not completing secondary. I decide to
speak with some educators in Bluefields and I am directed to the Escuela Normal, or the Normal School, a technical training school for teachers.

The Normal School is actually a secondary school but it is possible to graduate with a bachelors in education. The catch is that you’ve got to know that you want to teach and some children enter as early as eleven. I talk with one seventeen year old student who has been at the Normal School for a year. Minerva Morales is Garifuna, and although she was raised here in Bluefields, her family is from La Fe. She tells me La Fe is home. She is here because she wants to return to La Fe and teach in the school there. It needs help, she tells me. The children do not have the things they need to go to school. She pulls at her shirt.

“They don’t have uniforms, or papers.”

Nelia Garth
On her identity as a teacher, a Garifuna and a woman

Nelia comes from a tradition of teaching. Her mother is a teacher and her two sisters are teachers. Nelia is twenty-four and she always knew she wanted to teach. She was born in Orinoco but has lived in Bluefields for most of her life and attended primary, secondary and university here. Her family is in Orinoco. Her father lives in California and her mother lives here in Bluefields and teaches at the 7th Day Adventist school. All of her seven siblings live in Bluefields.

“Where do you call home?”

“Orinoco,” she points her finger out for emphasis. Pointing, I suppose, down the river. “Orinoco is my home.”

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6 My interview with Minerva Morales took place at the Normal School on April 26th, 2006. All quotations and opinions in her voice came from this interview.

7 My interview with Nelia Garth took place at the Normal School on April 26th, 2006. All quotations and opinions in her voice came from this interview.
We talk about the Garifuna community here in Bluefields. I have had mixed responses so far about whether one exists or not. Nelia says the Garifuna here in Bluefields stick together.

“People from the community are different from the city people.” Nelia prefers to deal with people from the community. Almost all her friends are from the community.

Nelia is in her third year at the URACCAN. She is completing the Bilingual Intercultural Education degree. She has one year left. She did her fourth and fifth year of secondary at the Normal School to get her teaching bachelors. She says she does not teach for the money. She works now at the Normal School and loves it because there are a lot of kids from the communities. Here at the Normal School the children have the right to express themselves in whatever language they feel most comfortable in. Classes are taught in English, Spanish, Creole and Miskitu.

Nelia wants to stay in Bluefields. She does not want to return to Orinoco. I ask her why. I tell her a lot of people tell me they want to go back. She says that there is no access in Orinoco. There are no lights, no internet, no computers.

We talk about the growing population of Garifuna in Bluefields and she tells me it is mostly women moving here to study. The men are staying in the communities to fish. Nelia is shaking her head. After a certain age, the boys need to feel like men, she says. They only think of money. There are some boys studying but the majority stay to fish and farm. The women, however, are thinking of their future. “They are thinking about what is going to become of their kids if they just stay and keep everything as it is.” The men depend on the lobsters but there are problems with this now. She tells me that Orinoco can no longer depend on the old economy and the women know this. The women used to depend on men. “Now the women is getting smart.”
But what about the high rates of teen pregnancy? She says, yes. Girls at thirteen and fourteen are having babies. It means they will have many by the time they are twenty-five. “It is a problem for the community. There are no jobs, there is no money and there are so many children.” She says it keeps the community down. It’s not the only thing keeping it down. Nelia talks about the abuses of drugs and alcohol in the community. Young people are not working. They are just getting money in the lobster season and hanging around smoking and drinking for the rest of the time. In the past every family had a farm. “No young people own farms. Only older people are making farms.”

Before we finish, she wants me to include something in my paper. She says that the Garifuna living in Bluefields are discriminated against. They are called “Caribs” they are called ugly and black and rough. Nelia calls herself a teacher and a Garifuna. She traces her Garifuna history to John Sambola. She is proud because she is related to him. She says everyone who asks her full name and hears Sambola knows she is from Orinoco and that she is Garifuna.

Vernan Ramos and Leonard Walters
On studying and waking up the dance

Vernan Ramos is twenty-eight and also teaches at the Normal School. He studied Intercultural Bilingual Education at the URACCAN with a scholarship. Vernan was born in Bluefields and raised in Orinoco by his grandmother. If he had to choose a home, it would be Orinoco but he also calls Bluefields his home and he plans to stay here. His mother lived and worked in Bluefields throughout his childhood in order to

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8 My interview with Vernan Ramos took place at the Normal School on April 20th, 2006. All quotations and opinions in his voice came from this interview.

9 My interview with Leonard Walters took place at the Mini Hotel Central on April 21st, 2006. All quotations and opinions in his voice came from this interview.
sent money back home. Like Kensy, Vernan had to move to Bluefields when he was around thirteen for secondary.

I ask about the conditions of education in Orinoco and why so many young students, especially the men, are dropping out. He has stern words for those students who drop out. He says they are not thinking. Or rather, they are thinking about making money and they do not see school as a means to do so. For them, Vernan says, going to class is wasting time. They want to go out to sea because there are opportunities to make money out at sea. He admits that the secondary school in Orinoco, as in the surrounding communities, is under-resourced in comparison to those in Bluefields. However, Vernan thinks educational enrollment and success have more to do with the motivation and dedication of the student than with the school. I ask about economic factors but he tells me that higher education is basically free right now. The university guarantees a full scholarship to those who can qualify for one. “It depends on the student to put his mind to study.”

At the Normal School, Vernan teaches music and dancing. He has been dancing for over twelve years and has his own Garifuna dance group, Spirit Dancers. I have seen Spirit Dancers and I loved them. He founded the group in 1997 as part of the cultural rescue effort. He had danced with another group beforehand but decided that Garifuna music and dance had to become a priority. Vernan teaches the dances as well as directing the group and dancing himself.

When I ask where he learns the dances from he says that he learned many from the ancestors. However, a lot of the dances had to be rescued. This is a term that is used often with the Garifuna. It actually has a number of meanings. With the Garifuna I have met in RAAS it most often refers to other Central American Garifuna delegations coming and teaching dance, language and music in Orinoco. There have also been
occasions when Garifuna here have traveled outside to learn, but it is always they that need the rescuing. I ask Vernan about what dances or Garifuna culture existed before the delegations. He tells me that there was a dance before and also music but “it was sleeping.”

The cultural rescue program is complicated and hard work. Garifuna as far away as Los Angeles are holding conferences on cultural rescue. The effort began in the 1980’s but did not take off officially until 1995. It was declared November 19th of that year and that date is now an annual Garifuna celebration. The efforts have mainly focused on language, music and dance but there are efforts to preserve all aspects of the Garifuna Culture. Of course many of the Garifuna communities throughout the Central American coast have developed in isolation from each other and so the conversation around what is Garifuna has been tricky. Vernan, however, has no reservations about the movement. He is very grateful for the delegations that came to teach punta music and dance and he continues to share and learn from outside Garifuna communities.

Spirit Dancers has ten members of dancers, singers and drummers although there are more like six who make it to the Monday through Friday practice. They have performed locally, regionally, nationally and internationally. Their farthest performance to date was in Panama and they are traveling to Brazil to perform in July. Vernan is responsible for the performance planning. Usually, when groups of tourists come into Bluefields, Vernan visits their hotels and asks if they would be interested in paying for a concert of traditional Garifuna music and dance. Most of the money the group makes pays for costumes and drum repair but the members do get tips. It is not enough to live off of, Vernan tells me. It is more a hobby than a job. Do all the members of the group

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10 Punta is the name for the traditional Garifuna music and dance.
have other jobs? Vernan laughs. He is the only one with a job in the group, granted he is older than the other members.

The next day I talk with one of Spirit Dancers’ drummers, Leonard Walters. Leonard is nineteen and born in Orinoco. Leonard tells me that he learned how to drum when he was twelve from a Garifuna man from Honduras who visited Orinoco as part of the rescue program. Now Leonard spends every night drumming and also teaches drums in the children’s dance group. His hands are calloused. He says with a shy smile that he is waiting for the Honduran to return so he can play for him. Unlike Vernan, Leonard thinks he can make his living as a drummer. He is still finishing up his secondary education in Bluefields and tells me he has no plans yet for university but he knows he wants to be a musician. Musicians can travel and play anywhere, he tells me. He is thinking of Brazil. He is thinking of Los Angeles.

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**My Home Sweet: The complications of belonging to Orinoco**

It takes a long time for me to get to Orinoco. The boat ride is two hours but it’s more than that. On Monday, the boat is broken so I cannot leave until Thursday. I ask the boat driver what time to be at the dock on Thursday. He tells me 9:00 am. “We always leave like clockwork, baby.” On Thursday, I wait from 9:00 am until 12:30 pm while the boat waits for enough passengers to fill up. I am in Orinoco just before 3:00 pm. When I finally arrive, the town is unusually quiet. It turns out that all the teachers and school administrators are in Pearl Lagoon for a workshop and the girls’ softball team in Tasbapauni playing in the tournament. They have lost their first game. It was a knockout.
Orinoco has always been a fishing town. It is still the primary income and is also what Garifuna food is primarily based on. The Pearl Lagoon basin has historically provided an abundance of fish. In recent years it has become apparent that under the same mistreatment, the basin will not be able to provide to the same effect. Fisherman began using large nets that catch all kinds of fish of all sizes at once. This method is not sustainable. Also, it used to be that catfish were the Garifuna fish and at one point it was only Garifuna who caught and sold catfish. They were identified for it. A few years ago there was a huge exportation demand and Pearl Lagoon was flooded with catfish fisherman from all parts. This lowered the population significantly. There are still more than enough fish to eat in the lagoon but it has been noticeably threatened. As far as the fishing economy goes, the lobsters in the Atlantic offer the best money in the market. However, that population has also severely decreased and now the entire RAAS fishing community suffers from a ban on lobster fishing during the mating season.

It used to be that farming played a large role in the Orinoco subsistence. For various reasons Orinoco farmers gave up their plantations after the revolution. Some say the plantations were abandoned because of fear and that after the war the farmers lacked the recourses to reconstruct the plantations. Others say that the community began to dedicate more time to fishing and less to farming, and still others talk about annual fires in the forests which make farming a difficult option. Some say farming is picking up once again, that people are returning home to start their own farms. However, I was told by one woman that while farming is slowly becoming more popular, most families just have small gardens in their backyards. The actual farmers with plantations she can count on her fingers. Regardless, I noticed that starting one’s own farm has been

worked into the communal dialogue surrounding progression, subsistence and future development.

URACCAN anthropologist Denise Lapoutre writes that little by little Orinoco is turning into a “sleeping community.”\(^\text{12}\) He is referring to the declining interest in fishing and farming and the increasing dependency on remittances from abroad.

Certainly, nearly everyone I talked to in Orinoco had complaints about the fishing, the lack of employment opportunities and the lack of electricity. There were many complaints. However, I also met some young people who were working to wake the community up.

**Dave Kendell Perez Sambola\(^\text{13}\)**  
**On farming, Brown Bank and making it better**

Dave has a plan. He will finish secondary, study Agro-Forestry in Bluefields, make some money and then he is coming home to live with Mommy.

Dave is seventeen and from Brown Bank. He is the oldest of seven children and acts it. His stepfather keeps a large farm and sells the produce for the family’s income. Dave keeps his own farm. He has a small plot where he grows sugar cane, cassava, plantains and fruits strictly for the consumption of his family. When, at fifteen, his mother told him he needed to look after the other Brown Bank boys his age, Dave started a boys group. The group meets and talks about how to live right and how to better the community. Because there is no secondary in Brown Bank, they decided together to leave Brown Bank, get educated and then return and work with their community.

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\(^{12}\) Obando Sancho, Victor *et al.*. *Orinoco: Revitalización Cultural del Pueblo Garífuna*. Mangua 1999. pg 72

\(^{13}\) My interview with Dave Kendell Perez Sambola took place the house of Rebecca Arana in Orinoco on April 29\(^{th}\), 2006. All quotations and opinions in his voice came from this interview.
Dave is in his first year of secondary in Orinoco. Many of his friends are in Pearl Lagoon but Dave has an aunt in Orinoco. He makes it back home about once a month to visit his family, work on his farm and talk with his fellow boys.

“When we want to meet up, all the teenagers come,” he tells me.

“Girls too,” I ask. Dave laughs,

“No, no our group is for boys.” Dave talks about the boys in his community who do not work or get educated. He says this is true for some men who are twenty and older but his age group is, for the most part, on track. Dave tells me all his friends are going to get university educated and then return as resources for the community. I ask him about employment opportunities in Brown Bank because as far as I know, there are none. Dave says that when the educated men return the community will want to pay them for their expertise and in this way, the community will create its own economy and better itself. He says he wants to study Agro-Forestry because he can educate the farmers and the community members.

Dave’s mother is the second head of the community. She also leads the 7th Day Adventist meetings in Brown Bank and works for the AIDS education campaign. Dave’s boys group talks about AIDS. They do not, however, talk about teen pregnancy. Dave tells me there is a problem with young mothers in Brown Bank but he does not seem to think it is an issue for the boy’s group.

I ask Dave how Brown Bank is different from Orinoco and he tells me it is quieter. He says they don’t have a place like the Ranch. The Ranch is Orinoco’s night life. On the weekends, the Ranch has music, drinks and dancing. Other nights there are movies. But to Dave the Ranch is bad news. He says there is a problem in Orinoco and also in Brown Bank with drinking and drugs. “Evilness goes on in the Ranch.” Dave tells me about drinking and fights. Dave does not drink.
In Brown Bank, Dave says the Garifuna culture is different. He tells me he cannot dance the *punta* because they never learnt it in Brown Bank like they did in Orinoco. The 7th Day Adventists have their own music and dance. He says the cultural rescue in Brown Bank is about the fish and the food.

**Vivieth Moses Arana** and **Shandy Lopez**

*On girls, GYFA and using your head*

Every evening the cancha, or basketball court, fills up with young people. Some are playing organized games, some just shooting baskets in groups and many people watch from the bleachers on the side. There are exceptions but for the most part it is boys playing ball and girls watching, especially amongst the teenagers. Vivieth is an exception. She moves between her girlfriends on the bench to the games on the court. Vivieth tells me that she loves sports, especially basketball.

Vivieth is very happy to talk to me and she arrives at our interview with a notebook of her own. She tells me she has questions for me also. She is fifteen and in her third year of secondary. Her favorite subject is math and she wants to study Accounting in Bluefields. She tells me she will probably end up living and working in Bluefields since there are no jobs here in Orinoco. The majority of her girl friends are also studying. Some plan to go on to university but some just want to finish secondary.

Two of Vivieth’s good friends have already had babies and she doesn’t think they are old enough. Having babies is more than just giving birth. “There are no jobs here to maintain them.” Vivieth says that there are workshops on sexual education about five times a year given by various community members. She also used to be a member of a group called GYFA (Garifuna Youth for Advancement), which works to educate

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14 My interview with Vivieth Moses Arana took place at the house of Rebecca Arana in Orinoco on April 29th, 2006. All quotations and opinions in her voice came from this interview.
15 My interview with Shandy Lopez took place at the house of Frank Lopez on April 30th, 2006. All quotations and opinions in her voice came from this interview.
young people about health issues. Vivieth thinks the youth have sex at an early age and those drinking and using drugs are not using their heads. Vivieth has a thirty six year old brother who loves to drink rum. “It already conquered him” she tells me. Vivieth says she protects herself from these threats by dedicating herself completely to her studies.

I talk the next morning with Shandy Lopez, the current president of GYFA. Shandy is twenty-one and recently became president of the organization. She tells me that GYFA educates around AIDS, sexually transmitted diseases and domestic violence. The group of about twenty-eight young men and women meets every Friday in a different house. They often split into smaller groups to learn about different health issues and then they come back together to share. As far as teen pregnancy, Shandy tells me the group talks about how to protect themselves with pills and condoms. Some of the members already have children. Shandy has a six month year old son, Sprirrel.

Last year, Shandy was in her first year of university at the BICU. She was studying Administration. She came home to Orinoco to have her baby but next year she hopes to return and finish her studies. She tells me her mother and sister will look after Sprirrel. According to Shandy a lot of Garifuna are unable to finish university. She says it is usually for economic reasons and that for every five students that go to Bluefields, only two usually stay on to complete their degrees. The scholarships at the BICU are intended to pay for housing, food and school fees but they do not cover all the costs.

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Education in Orinoco has the complicated character of being at once severely insufficient and also the best that it has ever been. The secondary school in Orinoco has only been complete through fifth year since 1994. This year there are 150 students
enrolled. The enrollment is bottom heavy; the first year class has 34 students and the fifth year class only 13. This is the largest fifth year class to date in Orinoco.

In the case of both the primary and secondary schools, the Nicaraguan government only provides minimal support. This boils down to a very modest teacher’s salary and, according to Frank Lopez, chalk. Frank Lopez\(^\text{16}\) is the former director of both the primary and secondary school in Orinoco and a current teacher in the secondary. He tells me that for a long time the BICU had to complement teacher salaries in order encourage teachers from Bluefields to fill the positions in the secondary. Even today, one of the teachers in the secondary requires a BICU bonus. He says that education has to be a pyramid of teacher, student and parent and yet the teachers are underpaid, many parents do not make it to meetings and the students, at the best of years, are looking at a 40% graduation rate.

It is not just the government. Frank Lopez believes Orinoco lacks educational consciousness. The parents are not involved like they should be. As far as the drop out rate, Lopez offers the common diagnosis. Boys leave to make quick money, girls leave to have children. Girls, he says, most often come back to finish their studies. The boys do not.

I am always given gendered answers when I ask about opportunities in Orinoco. At times, it seems to make more sense to ask about options for men and women separately than to ask about options for the youth in general. One musician shared with me a song he had written about getting a girl pregnant. One verse reads,

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\begin{align*}
I'm \text{ sorry baby girl for the damage I've done.} \\
If \text{ it be a daughter or if it be a son.} \\
If \text{ it be a daughter, keep her under your knee.} \\
If \text{ it be a son, send his ass out to sea.}\end{align*}
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\(^{16}\)My interview with Frank Lopez took place at his house in Orinoco on April 30\(^{\text{th}}\), 2006. All quotations and opinions in his voice came from this interview.
I decide to hear from the young people who have left school.

**Narisa Hudson**
On loving her baby and feeling bad

Rebecca Arana, a local nurse, tells me that right now in Orinoco there are twelve mothers under the age of eighteen. Narisa is seventeen and her daughter, Mishny, is one. I meet Narisa sitting on a bench with her baby on her lap. We chat for a while about Mishny, who is beautiful and in an entertaining mood. Narisa, on the other hand, is harder to talk to. She is shy and she looks exhausted. Narisa is one of twelve children and while no one in Orinoco has much money, her house looks worse than most. She was in her first year of secondary when she left to have her daughter and she has not returned. She says she would like to graduate from secondary but she has no one to look after her daughter.

Mishny’s father is twenty-one and has two other children from two other mothers. He is not currently in a relationship with any of the mothers. I want to know how Narisa feels about him but she won’t give too much up. He fishes and farms and Narisa tells me that he gives money and food when he has it. She says he comes by to visit the baby sometimes but she wishes he would just leave them alone. She says simply, “I feel bad about him. I want him to keep off.” I try to ask more questions but that is all she has to say about him.

Narisa says she remembers receiving workshops in school on sex education but she says she didn’t really take them seriously. She never used protection. She tells me if she was in a relationship now she would. For every question I ask about the Garifuna youth she brings it back to teen pregnancy. She says it is the most serious problem in Orinoco. I ask her about what her friends are doing now, whether they help her out or if

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17 Lyrics from a song written by Mark Hibbard.
they have children of their own. She tells me she has not had friends since she got pregnant. She is busy with Mishny.

Narisa wants to leave Orinoco and get work so she can contribute to her family’s income. She says she does not feel right living off of them. I ask her if she will take Mishny with her. She thinks the question is silly. She loves her baby.

Larence, Victoriano and Jose
On lobsters, rhasta styles and life outside of school

I am walking back from an interview when I hear catcalls. I turn around to find a group of young men gesturing to me from under a tree. After a quick and quiet debate I decide to see what they have to say for themselves. It would only be right to state beforehand that the following information was collected in an extremely casual atmosphere. I don’t think that Larence Morales, Jose Pondler or Victoriano Sambola, talkative as they were, took me very seriously.

We started out talking about school. I asked them if they were in school and Jose, who is seventeen, says with a laugh “we give up the school.” Jose left school in the sixth grade and Larence, now twenty-three, completed his second year of secondary. They tell me the majority of their friends are no longer in school. “They are hanging around.” I ask them why they left and Jose comes back quickly with a joke about plans to be a rhasta man. I think it was a joke. Larence tells me he left to work. He had his first baby at sixteen and the second, with a different mother, at seventeen. He contributes when he can. Neither of the two boys is working right now. They tell me they fish during lobster season. They are in good spirits though. They tell me they love Orinoco. They love their “home sweet home.”

My interview with Narisa Hudson took place in Orinoco outsider her house on April 29th, 2006. All quotations and opinions in her voice came from this interview.

My interview with Larence Morales, Victoriano Sambola and Jose Pondler took place under a tree in Orinoco on April 30th, 2006. All quotations and opinions in their voices came from this interview.
Victoriano, who has a slightly different story, speaks up about his identity as a Garifuna. He says that with the autonomy law he has the right to choose his ethnicity. Since everyone is mixed racially at this point, he says he is not pure Garifuna but it is the race he comes closest to and he has chosen it. Victoriano is twenty-four. He also dropped out of school but unlike his friends, he had made it to his third year of university at the BICU. He was studying tourism. Frank Lopez explained to me that a month in university costs the student around 2000 córdobas and they are given 500, or they are given house and board but still have to pay for transport, books, internet and other expenses. Victoriano wants to finish his studies but he does not know when that will happen. His first son was born last month.

The three young men all agree that the biggest problem in Orinoco is unemployment. Fishing and catching shrimp are not enough. They are unhappy with the lobster ban. Do they have any ideas on how to create jobs in the community? Victoriano says the community leaders need to talk to the government and ask for help.

* * *

Deverey Garcia

On the liga campesina, drugs and the Orinoco family network

The boys leave for the baseball tournament in Tasbapauni in two day. The Orinoco girls have already been eliminated and are headed home. The boys’ team meets every day on the field between 2:00 and 4:00 pm for practice. Along with the rest of the community, I have been watching their stretching, catching and practice games. Deverey is the twenty-nine year old team manager and we meet on the basketball cancha after the last practice. Tonight Deverey has to choose who is going to play for Orinoco in the tournament. Twenty players have been invited and Orinoco has twenty-six. “Six have to stay back. It’s difficult.”
Deverey explains that neither his job nor the tournament is very official. The liga campesina, Deverey is proud to tell me, was founded by Orinoco years ago for the surrounding communities. It is the lowest possible level of competition, but it exists so that the communities have the opportunity to play ball and also to interact with each other. Deverey does not want to see the community go “just like that.” The team and other sports are there to keep the community together and productive. All boys and men, young and old, are invited to play on the team. “If you want to play baseball,” Deverey says, “we going to find a way.” He says he was asked to be team manager because he knows how to respect and listen to the boys. This is his first tournament as manager.

I ask Deverey what he thinks about the young men in Orinoco. I tell him what I have heard about drop out rate, drugs and young fatherhood. According to Deverey, the boys leaving school are leaving to help their families out economically. He believes that in order for boys to stay on the right track they need to talk to their folks. It needs to start inside the house. “If you listen to your folks you can overcome anything.” Deverey talks to his team members about more than baseball. He offers them advice and tries to guide them down the right path.

Deverey, himself, left school in his fourth year of secondary. He left to work on a cruise ship and to help out his folks. He spent seven years on the ship traveling to Mexico, the States and as far as Europe. Deverey says he always wanted to come home. He, like so many others, calls Orinoco his home sweet home. “You have to show the young people that you can always come home and build something.” He points across the field to his pink house. Home sweet home.

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20 My interview with Deverey Garcia took place at the basketball cancha in Orinoco on April 30th, 2006. All quotations and opinions in his voice came from this interview.
These days, Deverey is out of work. He has a plan to start fishing and catching shrimp soon. He says he manages because of the community. There is a network of lending and support. He tells me Orinoco is like a family. “We live off each other.” Right now, he says this biggest problem is energy. There are rumors of electricity coming soon but as yet, Deverey says it is keeping the community down. “We need light.” With energy, the community will have access to television and the internet. Energy will advance the community.

Before I leave, Deverey wants to talk to me about drug use. I have not yet had an interview that does not touch on drugs or drinking. I have constantly been catching phrases like, “the young boys who aren’t in school are doing drugs,” or “the young boys make quick money during lobster season and then they hang around drinking and smoking.” There are also small things I notice like how most women I meet ask if I drink, or how the song played and sang most often in Orinoco is the country whine “if drinking don’t kill me the memory will.” Alcoholism and drug abuse are quick on the lips of many Orinoco critics and they are linked to problems with robbery and community disintegration. Deverey offers the calmest and least incriminating opinions I have heard yet. He says that there has always been drug use and alcohol consumption in the community. Marijuana is grown nearby and the strong Garifuna rum, Kasusa, is made in barrels year round. But Deverey has noticed it getting worse. It used to be that the young people would consume their drugs outside of the community: in private and away from the kids. Now, the consumption is more blatant. Deverey says people smoke on the cancha in daytime.

Deverey does not smoke himself but he believes in the medical and spiritual benefits of marijuana. He thinks rock, or cocaine, is the real problem. It is an unhealthy presence in the community but even with rock, Deverey says it’s complicated. A lot of
young people go “walking” or searching for sacks of cocaine along the waterfront that have been tossed into the water. For some people, big boat fishing is an attraction because it offers the chance to pick up these sacks at sea. Deverey tells me it is the quickest, easiest money possible. And everyone here needs money.

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Looking Out, Looking Forward - Tripping Up

There are two dreams in Orinoco. Taking off and coming home. Immigration is an economic reality. When I talk to Garifuna youth in Bluefields and also in Orinoco most have family members working abroad. Some of them are considering immigration themselves. Garifuna communities are forming in Costa Rica and throughout the United States. Most everyone who talks about leaving, talks about temporary immigration but coming home is not always a possibility. Of course, immigration culture, even the immigration to Bluefields, is a mixed bag. The exchange with Bluefields and the rest of Managua has, over the years, provided education, employment and also racial discrimination. When it comes to the United States, remittances are sent back home in dollar bills and also in basketball jerseys and big boat dreams.

Jonathan

On white girls, black girls and leaving

Orinoco fulfills every cliché about stars. The Orinoco night sky is heavy with holes and bright with light and it is not wasted on the locals. More than once my companions at night would point proudly up to their sky and on one such night I am asked if I have seen anything like it before. I am sitting on the wharf, feet swinging over the water, with a new acquaintance, a 21 year old young man, who we will call Jonathan. We are watching the moon drop below the water just one hour after the sun.
Together, we try to make science of this but give up after admitting that neither of us can explain very much that happens outside our sky.

Jonathan is leaving soon for the United States. He is going for several reasons. There is money to be made on the big ships in the States, he has a girlfriend waiting for him in Wisconsin and, he says, he is going for himself. He tells me he wants to travel. He wants adventure. Now, however, we are talking less about going and more about saying goodbye. Jonathan has family in Orinoco and Bluefields, a three year old daughter and a very good job. He drives the boat that travels every few days between Orinoco and Bluefields. It pays well enough and allows him to spend time in both his homes. He says he can’t even think about giving it up. He can’t think about giving up this sky.

He thinks it is time, though, and Jonathan is excited about seeing his girlfriend. He wants to make it work. Then he tells me what I have heard before over the last two weeks. He says he loves white girls. This elicits a long discussion about race and sex. What I really want is to walk back off the wharf but the field studier in me asks for reasons. Jonathan wants a stable family. Families here have too many parents and too many children. Black women, and he finally concedes, men, are cheating on their partners. White women in the States have stable families. We box around these ignorant, rubbish statements for a while, getting nowhere. I have had this discussion, or ones equally depressing, too many times in too many countries. In fact, it would have been a surprise not to find racism and sexism here, as ever, unhappily married, and working in common cause. It is always more depressing for me, however, to see the oppression turned in.

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21 My conversation with Jonathan took place on the wharf in Orinoco on April 29th, 2006. All information and opinions in his voice came from this conversation.
There is also the other kind of racism and marginalization that has been dancing around many of my conversations. It manifests in the relationship between Garifunas and the rest of the world. Kensy talked about it and so did Nelia. I caught wind of it back in Managua when middle class, educated Nicaraguans talked about the Costeñas who don’t work, the Costeñas who like the easy life and the Costeñas who use drugs – “the coast is a dangerous place.” If nobody had said a thing it would have been made apparent in the demographics. The area with the richest resources in the country is the poorest. It happens to be indigenous and black. ¡Que coincidencia!

Johnny Hogdson, Creole father of autonomy, academic and activist, says simply “we are marginalized.” He is referring to all Indigenous and Ethnic people on the coast but he says it has always been very hard for the Garifuna. The Garifuna language was originally lost, I am told, because Garifuna were discriminated for it. In the old constitution, neither the Garifuna people nor their language was recognized as Nicaraguan. Johnny says that today possibilities of overcoming the discrimination against the Garifuna are a million times better than they were thirty years ago. Autonomy was achieved with the principle of unity through diversity and the goal to allow all ethnic groups the same rights regardless of population size or level of development. The Garifuna ethnicity and language are recognized in the new constitution. However, while both the Mestizos and Creoles have had turns at the top of the pyramid, the Garifuna, along with the Sumu and Rama people, have always been on the bottom. The Garifuna still do not have titles for their land and in the regional council of 47 members there are 27 Mestizo representatives and only 3 Garifuna.

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Johnny tells me that the indigenous and ethnic populations on the coast take what they need from their environmental resources because they believe that how they were taught to live is sustainable. According to Johnny this is where the myth of Costeña laziness comes from. The other side of the country, the west coast, takes from the land as much as they can. “They fish and when there are fish still there, they don’t come home til they all gone.”
representatives. With these conditions, Johnny explains, one ethnic group could effectively make all the decisions. In this way, it looks like autonomy was made for the Mestizos and, although it was intended to include the Mestizos, it was specifically imagined to give power to the marginalized peoples of the coast. There are efforts today from the Garifuna and others to equalize the representation in the regional council and to further realize their legal autonomous powers.

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What’s here and what’s gone: A Conclusion

From day to day on the Atlantic coast, talking with the Garifuna youth could be both disheartening or inspiring. One reality is that there are not many programs for the Garifuna youth or for any of the youth on the Atlantic coast. There are limited educational opportunities and old race and gender dynamics continue to strangle, confuse and so limit these young people further. Another reality is that everyone I talked to had something to say for themselves and much of what they said was echoed throughout the community. Whether it was a concern or a critique or announcing a goal or inspiration, Nicaraguan Garifuna had a voice. The interesting thing for me was that there was clearly already a dialogue in place before I arrived. I found it interesting that I often heard the same concerns and even the same words used. I think it demonstrated the communal consciousness and also the communal sense of responsibility. Regardless of levels of success, there was a sense of everyone being in the same boat. As Deverey told me, Orinoco was a family in which everyone relied upon each other.

More so than anything else I was continually humbled by the understanding the Garifuna had of where they came from. The people I talked to did not talk about where they were from but where they belonged to. Home, as I understood it in Orinoco, was

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23 My interview with Johnny Hodgson took place over the phone on May 3rd, 2006. All quotations and
not a place but a life with a personality and a power. And Orinoco is powerful.

Certainly it is out of the way and it is small and under-resourced, but when I left I found myself promising to everyone, like so many others, that I was coming back.

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