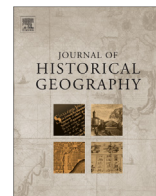


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# Discourse and the production of territorial hegemony: Indigenous peoples, the United Fruit Company and the capitalist state in Costa Rica, 1872–1916



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## Abstract

This paper examines the relation between discourse about Indigenous peoples, and the hegemonic consolidation of capitalist state spaces in early twentieth-century Costa Rica. It argues that colonial rationalities towards Indigenous inhabitants resulted in unstable deployments of the Indigenous subject as part of the nation, yet excluded from its capitalist spaces. This instability reflected the unstable nature of state territorialization itself. The state deployed spatial forms meant to encourage capitalist accumulation, and develop its frontier spaces, yet at the same time, saw its sovereign authority challenged by the United Fruit Company (UFC). This paper considers the brief creation of an Indigenous reserve by the UFC and the Costa Rican state in 1916, and suggests that this was a moment in which the relation between political space and Indigenous peoples became temporarily settled. Further, the paper argues that this process reflected the hegemonic consolidation of capitalist state spaces, even if the political status of Indigenous peoples remained fundamentally unresolved. The liminal position of the Indigenous populations—both part of, yet separate from the spatiality of the nation—is a condition of Costa Rica's Indigenous peoples that still exists today.

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For the indians live now just as their ancestors lived before the discovery, neither better nor worse, and they will go on living thus indefinitely, unless by some opportune help the foundations are laid for the future progress of the race, to which it is a right, as the mother in part of our own and as a member of the Costarican [sic] family.

—Alejo Marín, Letter to the governor of Limon District, January 12, 1897.<sup>1</sup>

At the time Alejo Marín wrote these words he was the *Jefe Político* (Political Chief) for the Talamanca region, an economically marginal space over which the Costa Rican state exerted tenuous claims to sovereignty. Within fifteen years of this letter's composition, the region would become transformed from a lightly

populated area of Indigenous peoples and a few agricultural colonists to a vast network of railroads and banana plantations. In 1916, at a time when the United Fruit Company (hereafter UFC) was rapidly claiming land, and turning it into banana fields, the company drafted a cartographic map of property claims in the Talamanca Valley. In response to pressure from government ministers, the UFC set aside a small space that was to comprise land reserved for 'indigenous peoples and agricultural colonists' (see Fig. 1).<sup>2</sup> This 'reserve' was short lived as the UFC began to occupy even this land less than a year later.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, this cartographic space marked the first appearance of an 'indigenous reserve' in the Talamanca region—a Cartesian space that was set aside specifically for Indigenous peoples to occupy. Not until 1977, when the *Ley Indígena* was passed, would such a space appear again in the form of the Talamanca Indigenous Reserve.<sup>4</sup>

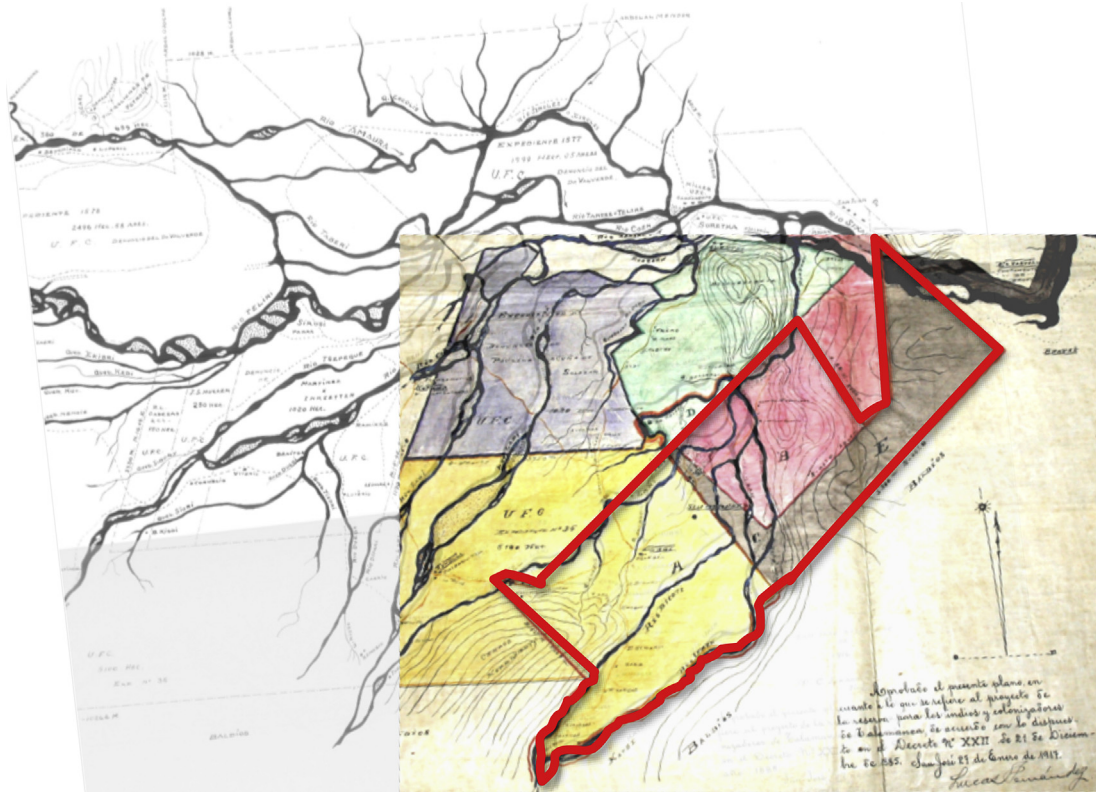
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<sup>1</sup> Alejo Marín letter to the governor of the Limon District, 12 Jan. 1897, Archivos Nacionales de Costa Rica (hereafter ANCR), *Limites con Panama*, Sig. 86, Caja 20, 509. Translator unknown. Document exists in the archives as an English translation of Spanish documents as part of an annex of documents for the Costa Rican – Panama border arbitration by Chief Justice of the United State Edward Douglass White.

<sup>2</sup> ANCR, *Mapas y Planos*, signatura 11010 (1916) (note 1).

<sup>3</sup> P. Bourgeois, *Banano, Etnia y Lucha Social en Centro America*, San José, 1994.

<sup>4</sup> M. Guevara Berger and R. Chacón Castro, *Territorios Indios en Costa Rica: Orígenes, Situación Actual y Perspectivas*, San José, 1992.



**Fig. 1.** UFC property maps. Color map<sup>79</sup> was made specifically to delineate the reserve and is laid over a larger black-and-white UFC property map.<sup>80</sup> Both maps delineate the property claims of the UFC and others, *baldío* land, and a 'reserve for the indians and colonizers of Talamanca, in accordance with Decree XXII of 21 December 1885.' (writing on bottom right). The area set aside as a reserve is marked with red border (added by author). Colored blocks of land are property held by different claimants, with the reserve consisting of land claimed by three different parties. The yellow block belongs to the UFC.

Today, the Cabécar and Bribri Indigenous reserves are the most recent manifestation of an Indigenous territory in this region (see Fig. 2). These are juridical spaces that in some ways are set apart from the rest of the Costa Rican nation-state. For example, forms of property ownership and modes of governance are distinct within these territories. The sale and demarcation of property is handled by the reserves' governance structure, the Development Councils, who technically own all of the land within the reserve and decide on land ownership as an 'internal matter' within the governance of the reserves.<sup>5</sup> Other aspects of these territories, however, are little different from the laws of the rest of the nation. Cutting trees on your land without a permit, for example, is illegal for Indigenous peoples in the reserve as it is for all Costa Ricans countrywide.<sup>6</sup> And the state can take away property if it is deemed in the interests of the nation, as it did in 2005 when it began work on a hydroelectric project that will flood the Boruca Indigenous Reserve on the country's Pacific side.<sup>7</sup> While there is no direct link between the institutionalization of today's system of Indigenous reserves and the brief appearance of the UFC reserve in 1916, both territories bear striking similarities. Indigenous territories in Costa Rica today occupy the same unstable position as the first Indigenous reserve: a space that is at once part of, yet separate from, the nation-state of Costa Rica. In light of this similarity, I ask: how and why did such unstable territorial forms emerge?

I answer this question by focusing on how the creation of this original Indigenous reserve signaled a moment of hegemonic territorialization of the Costa Rican state, where the legal and productive spaces of the region became a part of the nation-state of Costa Rica. I show that this was a process that hinged upon a contradictory position Indigenous peoples occupied—and continue to occupy—for the Costa Rican state. When the UFC created an Indigenous reserve it was a moment that consolidated a dual position Indigenous peoples occupied with respect to state space: there were excluded from the spaces of capitalist accumulation, while at the same time, the state understood and mobilized such populations as political subjects of inclusion. I argue that the ambiguous status of the Indigenous subject with regard to the space of the UFC reserve, and the continued liminal position Indigenous peoples occupy today—both part of, and separate from, the Costa Rican nation-state—are reflective of a contradictory process of capitalist state sovereignty that has been ongoing since the mid-nineteenth century. In this case, the territorial enclosures of the sovereign state require authority over Indigenous subjects even if the spatial forms that define capitalist social relations within the territory simultaneously demands their exclusion. The creation of the UFC reserve in 1916, and the existence of Indigenous territories in Costa Rica today, are reflective of this contradictory process. The purpose of this article, therefore, is to examine how

<sup>5</sup> Guevara Berger and Chacón Castro, *Territorios Indios* (note 4).

<sup>6</sup> C. Brockett and R. Gottfried, State policies and the preservation of forest cover: lessons from contrasting public-policy regimes in Costa Rica, *Latin American Research Review* 37 (2002) 7–40.

<sup>7</sup> Human Rights Clinic, University of Texas School of Law, *Swimming against the current: the Terraba people and the El Diquis hydroelectric project in Costa Rica* (2010). Available at: <http://www.utexas.edu/law/clinics/humanrights/docs/swimming-english-report.pdf>. Last accessed: Oct. 20, 2012.

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